EDGE®

HEROES WANTED!

DC UNIVERSE ONLINE: THE PS3/PC ACTION GAME THAT WILL TRANSFORM THE MMO LANDSCAPE

THE STORY OF SEGA'S ODDEST GAME EVER | CLIFF BLESZINSKI ON GEARS OF WAR 2 | INSIDE APPLE'S iPHONE GAMEPLAN

In the process of making **Edge** we do, of course, talk to game developers more or less every day. Few of them claim to have it easy, charged as they are with creating entertainment for a punishingly demanding audience in a market whose goalposts do not stay in one place for very long. But not many of them face the kind of challenges presented by a game such as this issue's cover star, *DC Universe Online*.

The clue is partly in the title. Games that make use of other media's established properties have been around for almost as long as videogames have been a commercial concern, but not many have dared to tackle something with this kind of breadth. The world of DC Comics is staggeringly complex – more of a multiverse than a universe, in fact – a conundrum of characters and parallel timelines that get so tangled up that they need decade-spaced 'crises': regular reboots to tidy away loose ends and balance the books, just to make sure everyone's straight on who's dead, who's alive, and who has amnesia/alien blood poisoning/strange new powers that will alienate them from their loved ones. It is no surprise that, in embarking on the project, *DC Universe Online* developer Sony Online Entertainment Austin hired a local comic-shop employee as a continuity specialist, a contributor to the project whose job it is to "know everything and read everything" related to DC properties, and constantly feed it all to the game team.

This isn't another scrolling beat 'em up featuring a bunch of characters slapping their way through a procession of forgettable levels. This is a full-blown, action-oriented massively multiplayer online experience which plays out over environments like Metropolis and Gotham City. And on top of that, as well as being lined up for PC release, it's also a PlayStation 3 game.

When you weigh it all up, you begin to understand the thinking behind Microsoft's decision to pull the plug on its own comic-book MMO, *Marvel Universe Online*, earlier this year. Making videogames in 2008 is difficult enough without having to wrestle with icons such as these, coming together against such beloved backdrops, in such a competitive genre. You can see how the makers of *DC Universe Online* are faring on page 60.

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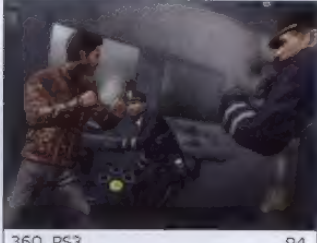
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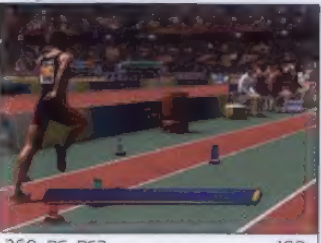
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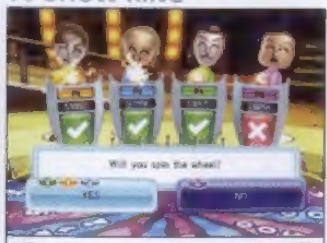
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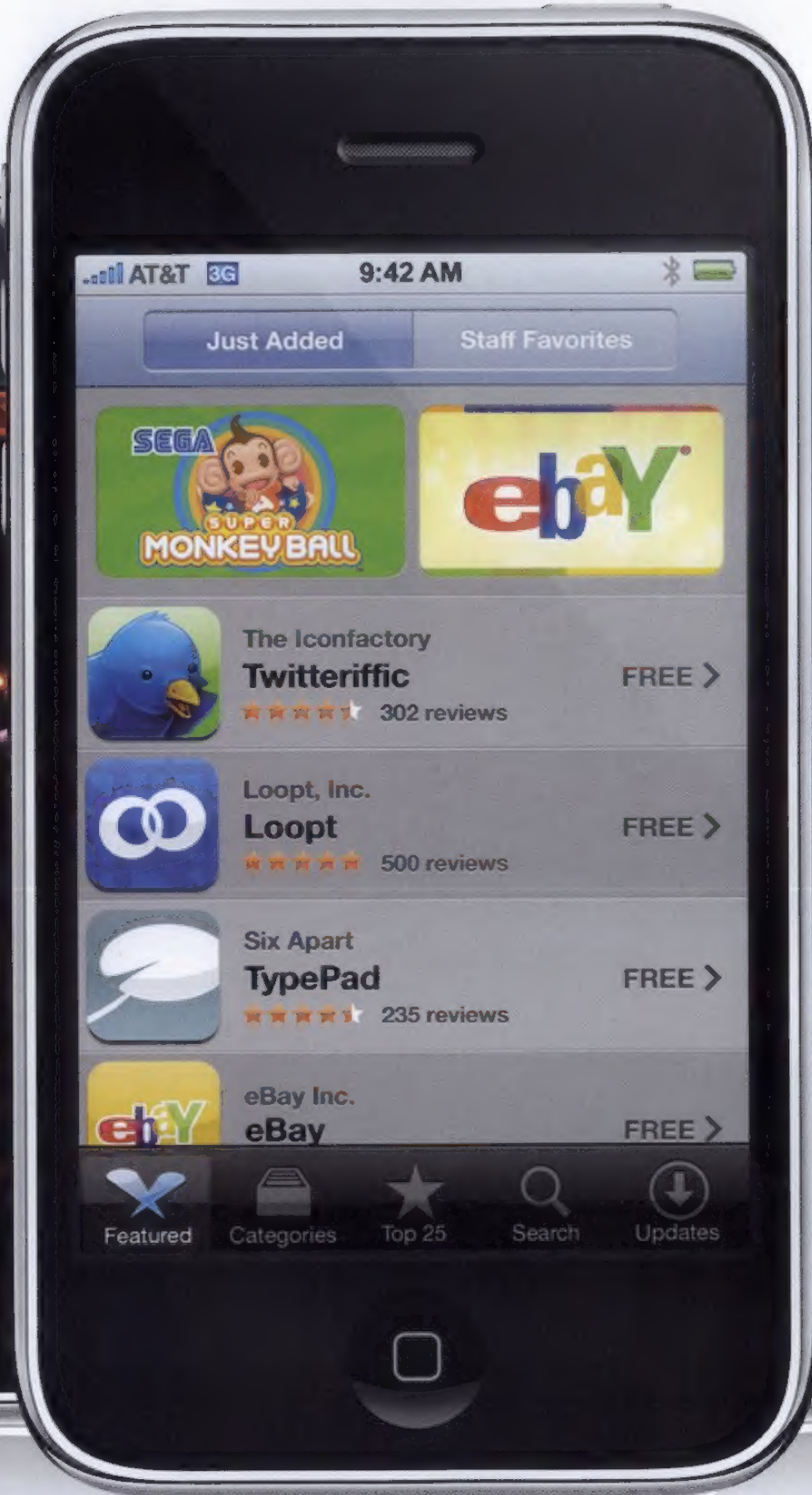
New model army

It's cheaper, faster and nearly here: can Apple redefine portable gaming with the 3G iPhone?

Apple's WWDC 2008 conference in June was all about two numbers: 3G and $199. The first was exactly what observers expected from it, but the second exceeded even Apple fanboys' hopes. iPhone, despite its improved specifications, including its mobile data connection, battery life and GPS, had suddenly jumped from being a expensive luxury to affordable commodity, and, in the process, added even greater weight to the idea that the tech company that made millions by dragging the music industry on to iTunes and iPod can revolutionise the mobile phone industry too.

And with Apple placing a clear emphasis on games by showing off prototypes of titles including *Spore* and *Super Monkey Ball*, it could also

> **"We could see similar phenomena to those experienced with the Wii and DS in terms of the gaming demographic being enlarged"**

revolutionise the portable gaming industry. iPhone's hardware capabilities, the iPhone developer programme and the way software will be distributed are unlike anything seen before on mobile phones or handheld consoles. In a feature that neither Nintendo nor Sony have yet implemented on their handhelds, iPhones will be able to download software directly from Apple's App Store, which is likely to be opened on the release of the 3G iPhone on July 11, and will be accessed through iTunes on computers. Apple has made software development accessible to large companies and bedroom coders alike, with the iPhone SDK free to download, and charges just $99 (£50) for the ability to test code on actual iPhones (rather than through the SDK's emulator) and distribute it on the App Store.

The hardware, meanwhile, is not only powerful, capably running 3D through its PowerVR graphics chip and equipped with a speedy CPU (see 'Core appeal'), but also features a touchscreen and accelerometer interface, with no buttons other than a 'home' key. It's a feature that many developers find exciting. "It's not an intimidating device and I think we could definitely see similar phenomena to those experienced with the Wii and DS in terms of the gaming demographic being enlarged," says **Simon Oliver** of Handcircus, a UK-based independent developer that is currently

From left, facing page: *Enigmo*; the App Store as it will appear on iPhone; *Trism*; and the main menu on the updated iPhone firmware, which will be released at the 3G model's launch

working on a physics-based 2D platformer called *Rolando*. "For those that have played Touch Generations titles on the DS, its a short step to playing iPhone titles."

However, just as developers struggled to work out how to use the DS interface when it was first launched, they must come to grips with iPhone's, too, which lacks the DS's fallback of D-pad and face buttons. "Technically it's not hard at all to use the touchscreen and accelerometers, and the sensitivity is way better than we anticipated," says **Yen-Kwoon Hun**, VP of technology at Vancouver-based mobile developer IUGO, which is currently working on a number of iPhone titles, including an FPS called *Re-Volt*. "The problem is mostly with how you're going to use it – it's a question for designers, I guess, in terms of doing traditional

Rolando, developed by Handcircus, is, shall we say, distinctly reminiscent of LocoRoco, but features more physics-based interaction and sits very naturally with iPhone's tilt controls

though – it could cause real frustration if an innocent elbow nudge undermines ten minutes of concentrated effort." He acknowledges, however, that this divergence from standard controls may work to force innovation, since easy ports from existing games will be tricky to pull off.

The comprehensive set of tools in the SDK, which was released in March along with a wealth of documentation on Apple's website, has at least meant that developers have found iPhone easy to work with from a technical point of view. And it's currently largely disproving the assumption that one of the most powerful mobile platforms yet made will demand much greater development resources. "It's easier to implement in a sense because you're less constrained by system resources. So for us it's a small revolution, because we're very used to low memory and things like that," says IUGO's Hun. And the interface may actually prove to ease the burden on mobile game developers. "N-Gage is also a closed platform but there are many phones that are compatible with it with many keyboard layouts so it's challenging. Maybe working with iPhone will be easier because the layout will always be the same," says Lee. "Supporting N-Gage and iPhone is easier than supporting J2ME and BREW," agrees Hun.

But as easy and creatively stimulating as smaller and independent developers have found making games for iPhone, few mainstream developers have yet committed to it. Sega's Super Monkey Ball and EA's Spore are the biggest names revealed, though Namco, THQ and PopCap have all pledged support. Even the biggest specialist mobile developers, like Gameloft and Glu Mobile, haven't yet shown what they have planned, though in March Gameloft claimed that it has 15 titles for release in 2008.

gaming without buttons." The solution for Re-Volt is to control movement by tilting the iPhone and auto-firing by tapping the screen.

For Digital Legends, whose thirdperson 3D action game, Kroll, was demoed during the WWDC presentation, the accelerometers are used to make the character jump higher. "We think we can do it better, but for the moment it's OK!" says content strategy director **Simon Lee**, who says that the project was in development for only a month on other mobile platforms before his team ported it to iPhone in just two weeks. "We were thinking: 'How can we make jumps?' We were playing with the corners of the screen and shaking the device."

> "Using your finger to control games is much like playing the DS using a hotdog, and it's more of a challenge to be precise"

It's not a simple matter of transposing design for the DS touchscreen to iPhone. "Using your finger to control games is much like playing the DS using a hotdog," says Oliver. "You can't see the objects that you are trying to select if they are below a certain size, and it's certainly more of a challenge to be precise. The touchscreen is much more geared towards gesture input than traditional click-select, so the control scheme I'm using has evolved considerably as development has progressed. I'm not entirely sure how easy it will be to use the accelerometer for control when you are out and about,

Digital Legends' Kroll is a 2.5D sidescrolling action game with both touch and motion controls

Demiforce's Trism uses both touch and tilt controls, and shows how broad the appeal of iPhone games could prove

The headliner at both Apple's March SDK presentation and WWDC was *Super Monkey Ball*, which is, naturally enough, controlled by tilting the iPhone. By March its team had created a prototype and four levels, and by June it had made 110
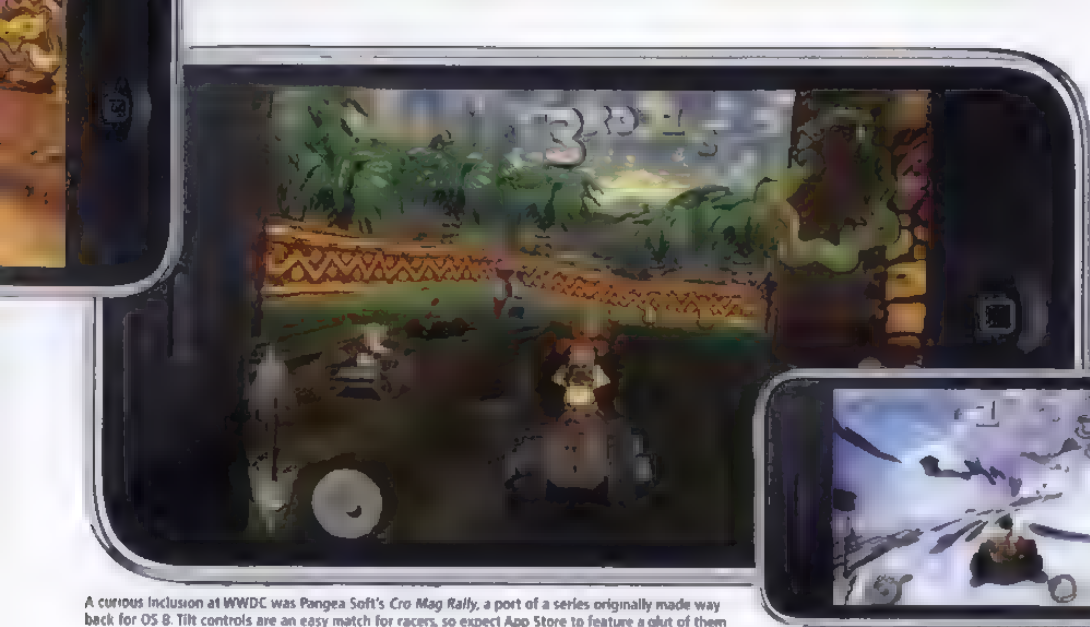
A curious inclusion at WWDC was Pangea Soft's *Cro Mag Rally*, a port of a series originally made way back for OS 8. Tilt controls are an easy match for racers, so expect App Store to feature a glut of them

The problem is iPhone's installed base. Apple never reveals actual figures, but Steve Jobs last year said it expects to sell ten million by the end of 2008. And while sales of ten million units in that time is broadly comparable to those of home consoles and handhelds, Cindy Cook, chief strategy officer for Vivendi Games, said at the LA Games Conference in May that the installed base was not yet large enough to justify production. And mobile developers feel the same constraint. "Ten million is a joke for a manufacturer like Nokia," says Lee whose company Digital Legends is a firstparty Nokia developer. "I agree that iPhone is the coolest device, but in terms of market share Apple has a long way to go." But he feels that iPhone owners are likely to be an audience eager for games, so he's adding the platform to the many others his company supports. "We need to cover as many platforms as possible," he says

But one factor that will be strongly promoting game development for iPhone is the App Store. Apple will not charge the licensing fees that Nintendo, Microsoft and Sony would on the applications that are distributed through its digital store. And since it's to be the only source of software for iPhone it completely negates the need for developing the relationships that mobile game publishers and developers have to cultivate with service carriers.

"Traditional mobile distribution is a walled garden, you pretty much have to have strong carrier relationships to get your games on a deck," says **Hong-Yee Wong**, CEO of LGO. "The App Store is probably going to be carrier-independent, so we can make an application and sell it directly to the consumer without talking to T-Mobile or whoever."

Apple will impose some form of approval process on software released through the App Store, but what form that will take has yet to become clear. "Very little has been communicated about the process, but it seems that they are keen to approve as much as possible," explains Oliver. "The opportunities provided by the App Store are definitely appealing, more so than any alternative distribution plans I might have." After all, the App Store will also feature iTunes' ease of browsing, the ability to link to products using web links, and its user reviews system – and all this with Apple taking no more than the initial $99 fee for joining the development programme and 30 per cent on sales.

"iPhone is a really positive thing for small, independent developers like us because it's going to allow for a shift in power. It's going to balance it out more," concludes IUGO's **Sarah Thomson**. "For the longest time, the carriers have had all the power. You had to be a big publisher to develop that relationship, and now the App Store is going to allow us to get our games out there without their approval. That's really positive for us, and will create a domino effect for more interesting games." Nokia, Sony, Nintendo and the mobile phone service carriers will be looking on warily. It's now time for game developers to show us just what iPhone can do ⏩
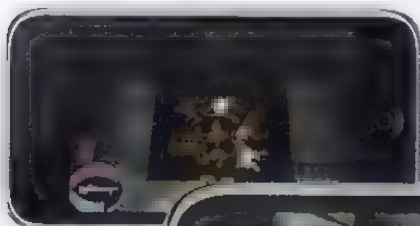
IUGO's *Re Volt* FPS started out as a tech demo of its 3D software, but has expanded to being a full game. Movement is carried out by tilting, while shooting is automatic but aided by tapping

Pangea Soft's other presentation at WWDC was *Enigmo*, a puzzle game involving redirecting falling water using touch controls, and another port of an existing OS X title. Given how long developers have had access to the SDK, ports are inevitable
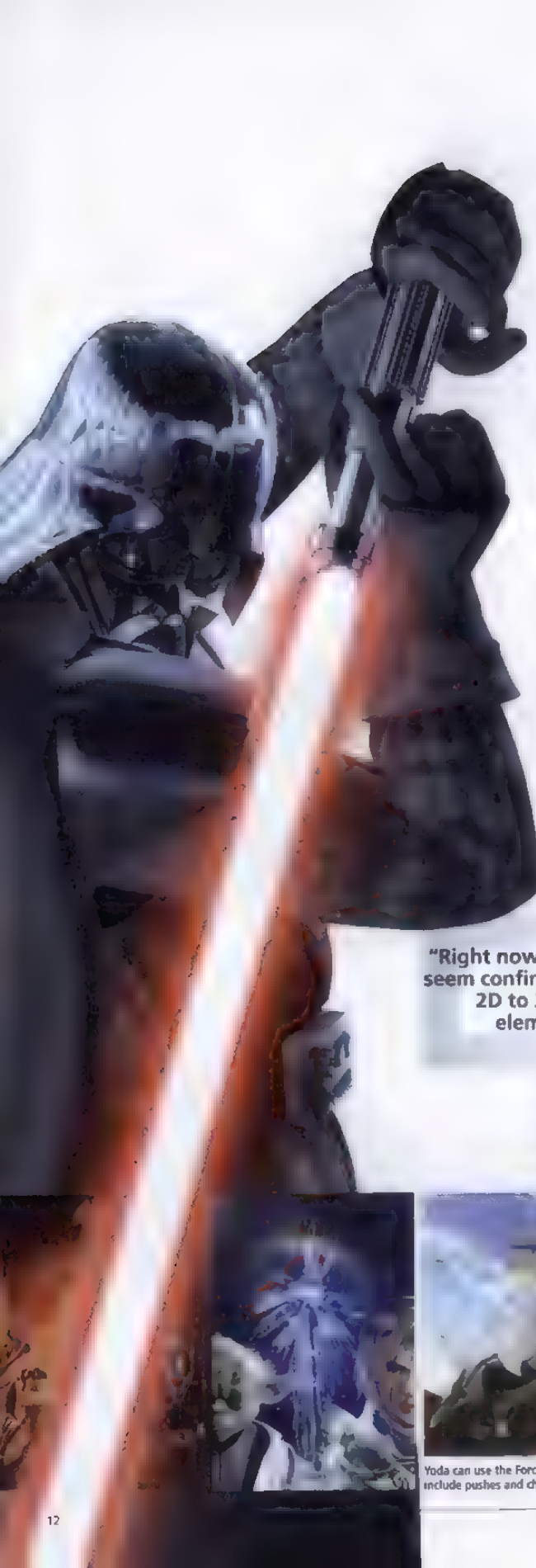
Fighting talk

Preposterous breasts and Star Wars tie-ins aside, where is the Soul Calibur series heading?

We've all heard about the fact you can play as Yoda and Darth Vader in the latest *Soul Calibur* game – but with the market for one-on-one fighting games in decline and the upcoming releases of heavyweight competitors like *Tekken 6* and *Street Fighter IV* it's all the more important to have some distinctive substance beneath the marketing glitz. We took the opportunity to sit down with *Soul Calibur IV's* director **Katsutoshi Sasaki** (above) to discuss the future of the genre and where the series will fit in

> **"Right now, fighting gaming's popularity might seem confined, but with the genre leaping from 2D to 3D there might be some kind of new element that will make it popular again"**

Masahiro Sakurai recently told us he hoped anyone could pick up Smash Bros and have fun just by mashing buttons. Do you agree?
Being accessible is one of our main goals, but the gameplay is also very deep – the more you get into

it, the more you find out about the series and the more there is to explore. Of course, if you compare *Soul Calibur* to something like *Smash Bros* it might not be considered as accessible, but in its own right the controls are pretty intuitive and even a beginner can come along, button-mash and have fun with the game. As far as entering the series the hurdle isn't as high as other fighting games might be. Adding online means that players can now find opponents of similar ability, we feel it is much easier to get into the *Soul Calibur* franchise now than it has ever been before

The Soul Calibur team was initially rumoured to be resistant to the inclusion of online multiplayer – why was that, and why did it then come round to the idea?
In Japan, focus on online hasn't been as strong as in the west – but recently we no longer feel that's the case. Initially, the reason the team didn't want to take the game online was that they weren't confident that the online environment, what with latency issues and so on, could provide gameplay that users would be satisfied with. But the online infrastructure has got a lot stronger, and even in Japan quite recently the focus on communities and games as a communication tool is increasing and catching up to western standards

Why do you think Japan has been slow in embracing online multiplayer?
It's hard to say – maybe Japanese people are just quite shy! Online communication with other people is perhaps something that Japanese people haven't been that comfortable with in the past. Of course, once Japanese people get into the community they really enjoy it. Japanese have a strong desire to achieve a high score and leave their mark on the ranking boards – that also helps
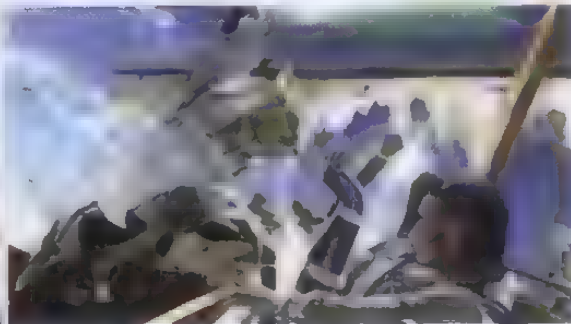
Yoda can use the Force to launch himself into the air for attacks, while Vader's powers include pushes and chokes. The characters have a special Force meter that can be drained

Do you think the fighting genre can offer any huge innovations, or is the future a matter of refinement?

The basic element of fighting games – fighting against other players – will hardly change, I believe. But it's hard to say where the genre as a whole will go – whether consumers will want something like Smash Bros, which is very accessible and easy to play, or whether they'll want more complex fighting systems. It's very difficult to read that. The basic elements probably won't change, but how you package it and polish it will depend on the needs of the gamer. However, with Calibur it's hard to rule out taking away the Calibur name and coming up with something completely new – that might be on the cards for the series, we don't know. When we came up with Soul Calibur Legends, we wanted to take some elements of Calibur that players really liked but provide a different view on the gameplay. So in the future we could have a Calibur game in a different genre, in a different guise.

One-on-one fighting gaming's popularity peaked in the '90s; is it all downhill from here?

You can say that in the '90s the peak of popularity was reached, but there's an ebb and flow to the popularity of any genre. Right now, fighting gaming's popularity might seem confined, and players are more into shooters and those kinds of games. However, with the fighting genre leaping

from 2D to 3D there might be some kind of new element added that will make it more popular again. But it's the same with fashion – the same trends tend to come back.

One way some fighting games have attempted to move the genre forward is by working on the arena size and shape. What do you think of those decisions? Is there an optimal size for fighting encounters?

It really depends on the fighting game itself. Calibur has ring-outs and a weapon-based system with very long or very short weapons. One of the main entertaining elements of the game is the distance between players, and so having ring-outs keeps the players at the optimum distance for strategy going back and forth with your opponent. You can fall off the edge and end the match instantly, which encourages players to use the eight-way run to move around the ring a little more and mix up the gameplay.

As the series has progressed, have you had lots of outlandish ideas for its development that, for one reason or another, you've had to ultimately reject?

There weren't really that many actually. Most of the outlandish ideas were implemented. The ideas that we rejected were the ones that appealed to just too small a group of fans.

Always outspoken, never out-talked St John has had plenty to say about Intel and Microsoft's 'failure' to support games

Beyond the box

Why the man who created gaming for Windows thinks he can save it – one session at a time

H aving brought gaming to Windows with DirectX, Alex St John (left) has become an outspoken critic of Microsoft and Intel believing bloated operating systems and lowest common-denominator chipsets to be the root of PC gaming's problems. Now, with the WildTangent portal and its upcoming 'console', WildTangent Orb, he hopes to capitalise on what he sees as the inevitable collapse of the videogame console industry. Is the prophet a fool?

WildTangent's definition of 'AAA' stretches from XBLA games like Sierra's *Battlestar Galactica* to *Company Of Heroes*. Its session-based, ad-funded play model's reach, however, remains uncertain

In arguing the case for the demise of consoles, you've used the Parks Associates study that suggests console gamers spend more time playing PC games. Given its vague definitions, how valid a statistic can this be?
People play a vast quantity of PC games, and I do believe they spend more time on them. After email and chat, playing games online is the number one computer-based activity. But people spend more money on console – that's the real issue. Games like Runescape make an interesting point: kids can

that, traditionally, it's been an unpleasant system to play games on. That single problem is devastating to the platform. But what natural changes would occur in the market if that problem went away? The market would expand, you'd imagine, to encompass a much wider range of tastes. With the Orb, we're trying to solve that problem really well, making the process of buying a premium PC game knowing that it'll run on your system, pain-free.

> "The one big thing that sets PC gaming apart is that, traditionally, it's been an unpleasant system to play games on. That single problem is devastating to the platform"

actually afford games, they just don't have the means of paying for them online. It's why online gaming, fundamentally, has to be free.

What would you say to console owners who might feel alienated by this push towards PC?
The one big thing that sets PC gaming apart is

Surely it's more than hardware. Driver problems and other support issues have crippled even enthusiast gamers. How long until those are resolved?
They probably won't be fully resolved, but we are doing a lot to remove the strongest negative of the PC. You've probably heard how disappointed I am with Microsoft and Intel. Microsoft is no longer taking responsibility to provide a clean and simple gaming environment, which is something we can partially fix with online publishing. We work with
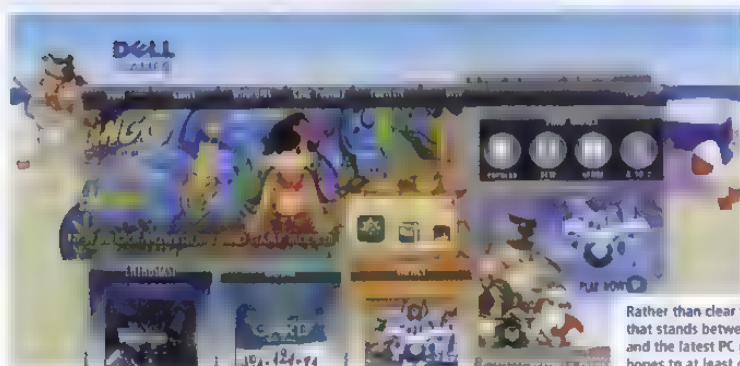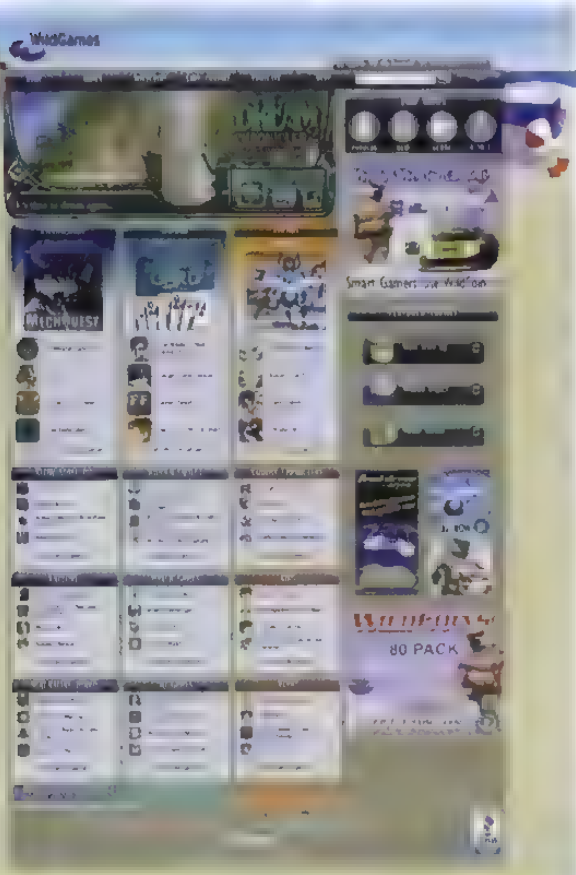
Rather than clear the hardware minefield that stands between average gamers and the latest PC games, WildTangent hopes to at least draw them a good map
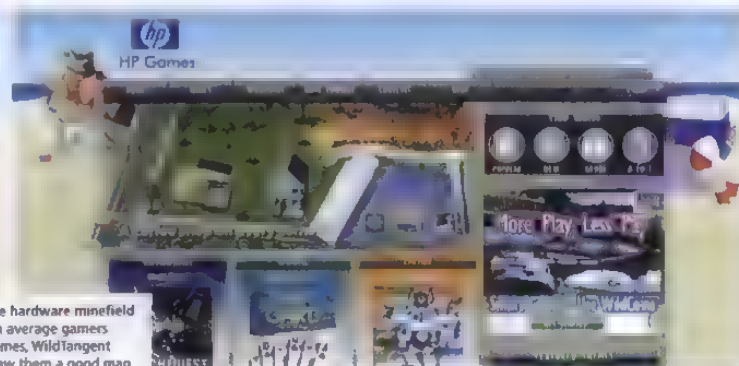
POLAR COOL

Toshiba, Gateway, HP, Dell: they already have the WildTangent console installed on their systems. And we do all the testing up front so we can tell consumers whether or not the content will work on those machines.

To an Xbox 360 owner, most of your games would seem casual. Do you plan to expand into the area of 'top-tier' console games?
Well, what would you consider to be an enthusiast game?

Something that requires a greater investment than most, be it in skill, time or money?
We classify it as the games that attract that core of male gamers.

Some might see this as an attack on the more cinematic tradition of console games.
Is it? I'm going to say something heretical now that old notion of the console wired to the big TV its time is up. Consider how laptops have changed the market. You have PCs now that can compete graphically with consoles, if not yet with 360 and PS3 then with Wii. So kids can play anywhere, or they plug in a gamepad and plug into a TV for that 'immersive' experience. People in our generation might cling to that idea of the console running Bioshock, but laptop gaming is going to dominate the market for this next generation.

You refer to the WildTangent Orb as a 'game console' when, technically, it's software for PC. Why use that provocative term?
We want to invite the comparison. We want people to think about how the market is changing. What is tomorrow's game console?

You've made predictions in the past, many of

them accurate. With traditional retail in apparent decline, what do you think is next for the high street?
If you go into a music store now and head for the CDs you see the iTunes vouchers hanging next to them. Ten years from now, there'll be nothing left of game shops but currency cards. The console era is fading rapidly because graphics are no longer the differentiator; people are looking for other things like community or new types of input.

Comparisons with Steam are inevitable. Can the two of you coexist?
Well, Gabe and I are old friends – we signed the deal that brought Doom to Windows 95. The way I see it Steam is an excellent hardcore classic PC service. We're trying more to recapture the console business for PC. These are different business models with different audience focuses. So we have a JV for ten-foot gaming on TV. Steam does not. And yes we will want some of the same content the Assassin's Creed, BioShock type of game. We're delivering the lighter content today; the heavier content will come when the Orb launches in July. But the biggest difference is the one that will make the PC the gaming platform of the future. Steam has the exact same business model as retailers do, mine is a pretty box. Its model is pay me $60 or go to hell. How many people would pay a $60 title if it were $20? $1? How about free? Our Sponsored Session mode breaks gameplay up so that gamers can play one session at a time. Each usually costs about $1, much like one song on iTunes. Or they can play that same session for free when sponsored by an advertiser. This mode drastically expands the market of any given game and is very similar to how the consumer drove the music industry to break up albums into singles.

Born free

Far Cry 2's open savannah gives the player plenty of space to run riot – but can it tell a coherent tale, too?

Clint Hocking (below), creative director of Ubisoft's Montreal studio, says that one of the biggest challenges in developing Far Cry 2 is ensuring that it manages to be both narratively fulfilling and completely freeform. We pulled Hocking aside after his presentation at Ubidays to explain how players will be satisfied regardless of whether they throw themselves into the game's emotive revenge fiction or simply run around setting fire to zebras.

"How do you make the open world feel like there's always stuff to do? The bad way is to have just more chaos, and the good way is to give the player lots of things to motivate him"

Far Cry 2 gives players of a blank-slate character, but even when working on the Splinter Cell series, Hocking was eager not to have Sam Fisher say anything that jarred with player intent

You've said that Far Cry 2's AI buddies are important to the storyline as a whole, but doesn't the fact that they can die make them fairly disposable elements?

They can die, but they are central. The story as it stands requires that there is at least one buddy who survives through the story to a certain point. But that doesn't mean that he becomes invincible, he's just made unavailable. But that kind of situation only arises if you're really, really careless – like you're shooting them for laughs. In fact, you have to find them, unlock them, get them involved in combat and then shoot them in order to get rid of them. Only then would you come to some weird case in the scenario where something feels a little bit forced, but I'm not really worried about that being at all typical.

Do you hope to direct players' experiences with narrative, or simply give the player a playpen, like Crackdown?

Firstly, I think there's significantly more going on than you'll have seen in the demos – they've been specifically put together to have, for lack of a better word, a narrative through-line, so all the objectives are in order and people can follow what's going on. But all of the exploration stuff in the game is what fills it out – all of the opportunities for the player to create his own goals. The question is, how do you make the open world feel full and feel like there's always stuff to do? The bad way to do it is to have just more chaos, and the good way to do it, from my perspective, is to give the player lots of things to motivate him to have his own objectives. I actually think Crackdown is a good example of this – often your objective is to get on top of the tallest building, and that's motivating for players. They

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want to do that. All we've done is target the things that we think our players want to do in the game and put a little lock symbol on them – and they're like: "I want to remove that lock" – right?

How do you feel about the other games that are using open worlds – do you even conceive of it as a genre?
I'm beginning to think of it as a genre. Like, I don't really think of our game as a shooter, I think of it as an open world game. I think we have a lot more in common with *GTA* or *Crackdown* than we do with *Doom* or *Quake*, that's for sure. The genre's evolving and there are lots of different interpretations of how they should work and what the genre's conventions are. Maybe that's why they're so attractive – because there aren't that many conventions yet – it's so freeform that it gives a lot of room for expression. It's certainly that which attracts me to it as a player – an opportunity to express myself. The ones I don't like are the ones where I feel I am not expressing myself.

During your presentation earlier you said that when you encounter a protagonist who expresses something that doesn't match your own feelings as a player, you turn off the game. Why does that annoy you so much?
I remember writing dialogue for Sam Fisher when I was working on *Chaos Theory*; it was super important to me to be able to detect the actions of the player. When he kills a guy, I didn't want him to say a corny one-liner just because it was cool – I'd rather have him pick up on some previous action and say something that reflects the mindset of the player who choice that action. And *Splinter Cell* was good for that because you had this fairly binary system: choosing to kill someone, choosing

Working with buddies puts their life in jeopardy, says Hocking: "They'll ask you to do something while you're on a mission to open up a risky opportunity for them. You're not going to have to, but you should probably go and make sure they don't get killed"

not to kill someone. And it enabled us in a lot of cases to say stuff that I think was pretty well-targeted to the player's feelings. Hearing the one totally out of place one-liner from a macho hero when you were really proud of doing something subtle completely ruins it.

But doesn't the opposite of this, the voiceless and transparent protagonist, also often limit the character to silently shooting things? Will this cliché disappear?
Maybe. There are certainly a lot of people pushing towards heavily realised characters, and they're doing very well. I think the point is that the bar has been upped in favour of strongly developed characters with personality that you play. And on the other side you have characters as vessels that you fill – we really need to step up to bat too.

"Some people come in for trouble with internet porn. But the computer gamers tend to be harder to treat. People feel a lot of shame around computer games. Whereas it's socially acceptable to have a porn problem."
says **Dr Jerald Block**, a psychiatrist from Portland Oregon, who has coined a brand-new psychological condition: pathological computer use

"I think videogames, YouTube, you know, these are the things that will change the world. Because when people see what garbage everybody else is consuming, they want it too."
Salman Rushdie posits videogames as one of the western world's most crucial cultural exports to particularly hardline Islamic countries on The Colbert Report. Hey, wait, did he say garbage?

"When comic book people are looking down on you as cultural refuse, you know you're at the bottom of the barrel."
Will Wright is another to remind us of the natural order of things

"We are working on a fix for this and your breasts should be back to normal soon."
Funcom placates *Age Of Conan*'s disgruntled barbarian hordes, whose female characters chests had deflated due to a launch bug

"Holy shit. Holy shit. Holy shit. Holy shit. No way. No way. No. Way. No fucking way. Oh my God. Oh my God. Oh my God. Holy shit. 100 fucking per cent. My hands. Holy shit. Holy shit. Holy shit. Holy shit. Holy shit. That just fucking happened."
YouTube user **iamchris4life** 100 per cents *Guitar Hero 3*'s Through The Fire And Flames on Expert difficulty, achieving a 3,722-note streak

Peering into the Void

The new game from former Crimson Skies devs is still taking the high road to revenge

Things went quiet for **Ed Fries** after Microsoft's cancellation of the *Crimson Skies* series. But now he's back with Capcom shooter *Dark Void*, which blends *Gears Of War*'s cover combat with vicious vertigo. We talked to Fries and lead designer **Jose Perez III** about how the process went

Several of the team worked on *Crimson Skies: High Road To Revenge* as part of Microsoft's FASA Studios. Why didn't you pitch *Dark Void* to Microsoft?

Ed Fries: When we got together, Microsoft had just cancelled *Crimson Skies*. And the original pitch was a lot more like *Crimson Skies* than this ended up, so it didn't really make sense to go with them. I think if we pitched *Dark Void* in its current form

> "It took somebody betting on us really early when the idea was unformed. New IP is really difficult, and you have to be prepared to fail a lot before you succeed"

they'd be very interested, but it took somebody betting on us really early when the idea was unformed. New IP is really difficult, and you have to be prepared to fail a lot before you succeed

So, was Capcom the first game publisher you approached?

EF: We didn't just pitch to Capcom. What we liked about them originally was that they're a developer driven company, but in some sense too it's just that they were willing to give us a chance.

Jose Perez III: The great thing about them is that they let you innovate, unlike a lot of companies. They're known for their innovation, whereas a lot of companies are like 'Just make it the same as the

last game, because that sold well'. Also, I wanted the Capcom logo to come up at the start of a game I designed

EF: After we signed with Capcom, they were stoked. They didn't have a head of development, so they went out to find one and they found Scott Bayliss. Scott came from Midway and before that EA, but before that he worked under me at Microsoft on *Crimson Skies*. So in a way it was like this homecoming

You've said that the game you originally pitched to Capcom was very different from how *Dark Void* looks now. How much did you manage to salvage from the original version?

EF: When vertical combat came in, that changed everything. The story changed, character changed, everything. Some of the flight stuff, the technical stuff we managed to keep, but everything else had to go

JP: We had some core technologies in place which we still use now. We're using the Unreal 3 engine, which works really well for the kind of game we're making. So some of it – some of the flight stuff in particular – went over, but it was a different game

EF: We had a motorcycle that worked, it was cool, it was fast, we didn't want to get rid of it, but we sat down and it didn't support the core of the new game which was about vertical spaces not horizontal spaces – so we junked it

JP: Why use a motorcycle when you've got a rocket pack?

**So you came up with vertical cover combat. One problem with cover systems – even in games like *Gears Of War* and *GTAIV* – is

Fries (left) was vice president of game publishing at Microsoft for much of the first Xbox's life. Perez, meanwhile, has not ruled out the chance of revisiting *Crimson Skies* in future
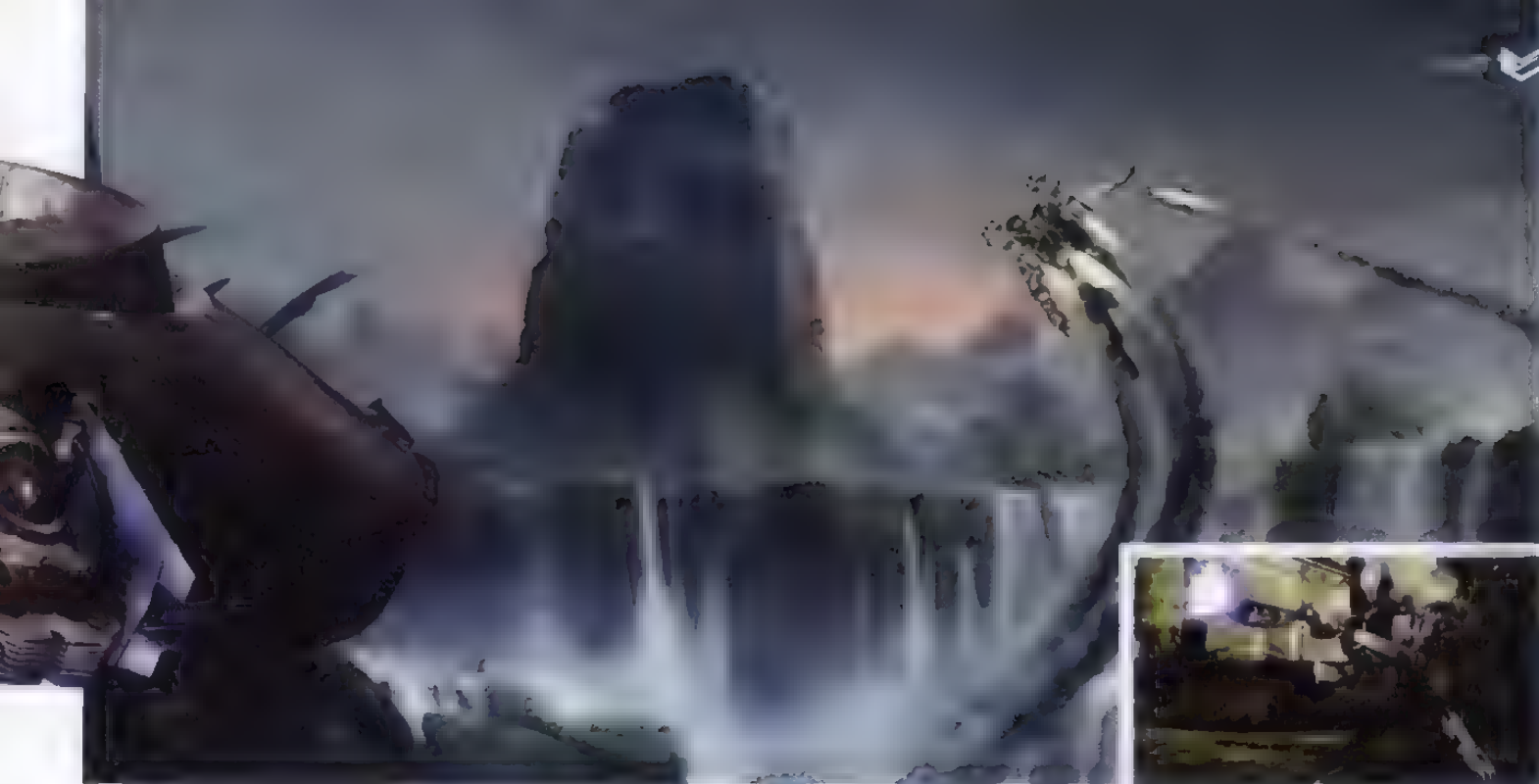
that the hardware sometimes makes odd choices for the player. How are you going to avoid that?

JP: We're still working on it, for one. Unreal 3 s a good engine to work from – plenty of games like that have good cover systems, we're leveraging a lot of those technologies. It's about not having automated cover, it's about not accidentally sticking to it. It's about saying 'I'm going to commit to this action, to taking cover.' And being able to pull away when you want to. We're trying to shy away from context-sensitive icons, so we're trying not to jumble things up. It's really more of a level design thing, so we won't be having huge blocks of cover next to each other.

More games seem to be using the idea of verticality – Assassin's Creed and GTAIV use a lot of high buildings. Do you see vertical cover becoming the new cel-shading?

EF: As long as we're the first to do it, I hope so.
JP: It's not as simple as you'd think. I thought it was going to be easy, I was like: 'We'll just take our cover and turn it sideways.' That's not the case. It's a massive pain in the ass to get the camera to work right when you're moving up or down something. And then we threw in some grip stuff and flying just to make it more tricky – the idea of things falling on you and knocking you off.
EF: But it's a good point. Hopefully, this'll be one of the first games that explores more of a true 3D environment. And people should innovate on that and we can innovate on what they do.

You've also had access to Capcom's broad stable of developers. Has that influenced the game design?

EF: Oh yeah, Inafune-san came through and he's given us lots of good advice. We like to proactively

talk to those guys because they're a wealth of experience. The guy's sold 40 million games. There's no pressure to make sure those guys sign off on it, but it's something that would only benefit the game, right? One very complimentary thing that Takeuchi-san said was that Dark Void is the first western developed game where the boss feels like it was developed at a Japanese company.
JP: One thing I've noticed is the emphasis on character. I mean you look at Capcom games and the characters are always the centrepoint of posters. And it wasn't until we started thinking in a Japanese way that we started thinking of our character as being that big, that iconic.
EF: Another very specific piece of information that he gave us directly is that fighting living creatures is much more appealing than fighting robots. The Watchers – our enemies – might be wearing suits, but they're living, breeding creatures.

Lots of games are taking the sci-fi approach nowadays. How do you see Dark Void making its own mark?

JP: Our enemies are designed by Airtight with Nathan Crowley, who also worked on Batman Begins. He brings a fresh eye to things. What we do is look at more than it needs to look like this is. What's the story, what's the gameplay style, how is that supported by our art style?
EF: Sci-fi is very difficult because you can run into cliche very quickly. I feel like in the last two years grounded sci-fi has really become in vogue – you have Battlestar Galactica and a lot of people bleeding off that, even France by JJ Abrams is getting into that. So the easy answer is that Airtight took a big risk and the iterations went on for a while. I think it looks much better, much more defined than before. You have to take that big risk.

Dark Void's backstory involves a force consuming the universe, ancient beings banished to a parallel universe, and a few inhabitants of the Earth developing extraordinary powers

AMD and Havok cosy up

Following Nvidia's acquisition of physics technologist Ageia back in February, AMD has announced its intention to keep step by incorporating Havok's physics technology on its chipsets. Previously, AMD has been keen to push physics calculations on to its CPUs, but the fortunes of its competitors have prompted it to optimise its GPUs for physics as part of the deal with Havok. It's a surprise move – Havok is owned by Intel, a company in competition with AMD. However, when it comes to Nvidia, Intel and AMD seem to be applying that old adage: the enemy of my enemy is my friend.

Mind over matter

Can OCZ Tecnology head off the gamepad, or
can the mouse win the battle of twitch-gaming?

For any futurologist charged with the task of predicting how games will change in the next century, surely one of the first anachronistic excesses to be consigned to the wastebasket will be traditional manual input systems. In what is essentially a translation process, converting the intentions of the player into resultant actions within the game's world – having an abstracted physical layer that involves button or key presses is the equivalent of constantly referring to the Rosetta Stone. The ultimate goal for gaming control is, arguably, complete and direct enactment of intention through thought alone.

With the introduction of OCZ Technology's imposingly named Neural Impulse Actuator, PC players are at least inching towards this shining ideal. Comprised of three electrodes attached to a forehead-mounted headband, the NIA actually detects biopotentials – in this case minute changes in electrical activity across the surface of the skin. Depending on differing frequencies, signals are subdivided into muscular, ocular (left and right glance) and brain waves (alpha and beta). Through the included software and an extensive customisable profile system, signals of different strengths within these divisions can be mapped to key presses, with the muscle reading the most easily manipulable. While in most games this won't allow for the ceremonial casting aside of all manual control, as players gain more subtle command over signal generation, greater numbers of individual inputs can be assigned to each of the spectra. In practice, it will take several hours of face-pulling to achieve the precision required to successfully operate the movement and firing of a firstperson shooter, for example, and players will remain umbilically attached to their machine through the mouse.

The software comes preloaded with starter profiles for a handful of popular games, including Half-Life 2 and Unreal Tournament III, plus standard WSAD controls. The profile editor is an extremely flexible key-mapping tool when the inevitable need to tweak arises

> "An involuntary muscular reaction as an enemy rounds a corner can unload a barrage of ordnance before the surprised player has had time to process the visual stimulus"

One of the better training tools, and also the system's party piece, is a reproduction of Pong that can be controlled entirely through muscular signals. A clenched jaw or raised eyebrow sends the paddle northwards, relaxing brings it to rest at the bottom, but the key is mastery over the gulf of intermediate positions. While the included software contains tutorials on how to correctly install and calibrate the device, there's little in the way of guidance for teaching yourself to harness each discrete signal type, making an already protracted learning process even less palatable.

The reward for dedicated application, however, is a substantial and noticeable drop in reaction times as the traditionally exercised neuron loops are removed from the equation. It's not necessarily a great boon as far as movement is concerned, but an involuntary muscular reaction as an enemy rounds a corner can unload a barrage of ordnance before the surprised player has had time to process the visual stimulus – the speed with which it occurs (quoted at between 80 and 150 milliseconds compared to 200 for a mouse click) and the subconscious nature of the reaction combine to produce a convincing approximation of psychic foresight. With twitch shooters a cornerstone of PC gaming and tournament jackpots ever increasing, the allure of such guaranteed performance enhancement will inevitably make the NIA well worth the £99 asking price for a certain, perhaps small, demographic. The limited number of possible mappings and resultant reliance on mechanically predictable macros, however, will no doubt be altogether less appealing to that same crowd.

As far as the majority is concerned, the first-generation Actuator is in danger of being dismissed as an amusing novelty rather than the first exploration of a valid area into which peripheral manufacture could expand. Compared to recent challenges to the accepted norms of control, the Wii's motion sensitive Remote or Guitar Hero's mimicry of real instruments, the practice required for consistency makes the NIA exclusive in an era when videogames are becoming increasingly inclusive. If the concept is to succeed in the plug-and-play environment of the consoles, which is no doubt OCZ's ultimate goal, a combination of further refinement of frequency division, expedited learning and games designed specifically for the device will be key

Continue

We sort of like it when she calls us 'Spanky'

Can we begrudge dad's victory at Boom Blox?

Its tenth birthday's coming, after all. And it was cheap

Quit

Sorry to go on about it. But it's not going away

This isn't what drop-in drop-out means, is it?

Let's all take a deep breath. It's still 8/10
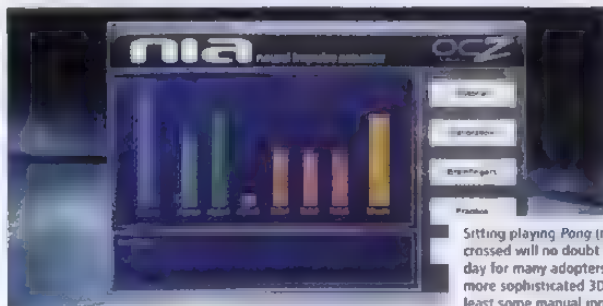
Sitting playing Pong (right) with arms defiantly crossed will no doubt be the first order of the day for many adopters of OCZ's peripheral, but more sophisticated 3D titles will require at least some manual input, usually mouse control

so solid crew

Television's depth charge

We've seen the future of the idiot lamp – and it's not entirely convincing

Alongside roast beef pills and the option to commute to work inside a giant Perspex pipe, 3D television displays will be a key indicator that the future has finally arrived. That may explain why Philips has such high hopes for its WOWvx HD monitors, which give video images the illusion of three dimensions without the need for cardboard glasses.

The keys to WOWvx are the lenticular lenses set into the screens. these take an image and split it up so that the viewer's left and right eyes see things from a different perspective, and the brain then interprets it as a three-dimensional object. Philips calls this approach '2D-plus-depth', and is creating a range of high-definition displays that utilise the technology.

June's WOWvx demonstration in London featured showreels filled with tech demo evergreens like meteors and hot air balloons. The 3D effect is disappointingly subtle. WOWvx excels at giving objects a sense of separation from their backgrounds, but it's got the 'paper layers' feel of early 3D films, and struggles to create crowd-pleasing Imax-style illusions such as objects vividly emerging from or falling into the screen.

WOWvx is initially targeted at the advertising sector, and there was only a single example of a videogame in the entire demonstration

Philips says consumer research suggests the public sees 3D TV as the logical evolution of the medium, which doesn't explain why 3D cinema has struggled to escape from the ghetto of gimmickry

that videogame companies should see this as an opportunity to re-release updated versions of their back catalogues. PPC confirmed that it's talking with several major publishers, but is refusing to name them, or discuss whether it has yet met with Sony, Microsoft or Nintendo.

For PC titles, however, things are looking more promising. Able to pull geometry and depth information directly from the code's Z-buffer data, WOWvx screens, when used with a software plug-in, can run games in 3D on the fly. PPC suggests that the plug-in will retail for around £100, and claims that every PC game made in the last ten years should be compatible. Privately, we were shown *Assassin's Creed* in action, and although WOWvx caused a small nuclear meltdown with the game's mini-map, the rest of Altair's world coped admirably with the shift in dimensions

> **Pulling geometry and depth information directly from the code's Z-buffer, WOWvx screens, when used with a software plug-in, can run PC games in 3D on the fly**

(Furthermore, the game was *Little Britain*, which suggests that Philips may need to do some better research.) The ultimate goal, however, is the living room, and Philips has announced that videogames, with their core audience of early adopters, are just as important to WOWvx as the DVD market

There are significant problems ahead, however almost all video footage needs to be converted by Philips' partner, the Picture Production Company (PPC), in order to display in 3D – plug a console into a WOWvx television and it outputs in standard 2D. Ominously, WOWvx marketing is suggesting

Yet even if Philips could convert all existing media to 3D, WOWvx would possibly be too quirky a proposition for the mass market, which is still busy paying off its HD televisions. When you factor in the need to repurchase new versions of old games to play them in 3D, things look bleak – at least as far as the home consumer's concerned

Advertising is a different story, of course, and an area in which WOWvx's gimmickry will be quite comfortable, but for console games, the 3D revolution is unlikely to be televised any time soon.

Screenshots and video clips don't do WOWvx any favours when it comes to spreading the word – also a factor in the fortunes of other 3D displays, such as Nintendo's Virtual Boy

GIVE YOUR
TRIGGER FINGER
A REST AND
PICK UP AND
PICK UP YOUR
BRAIN
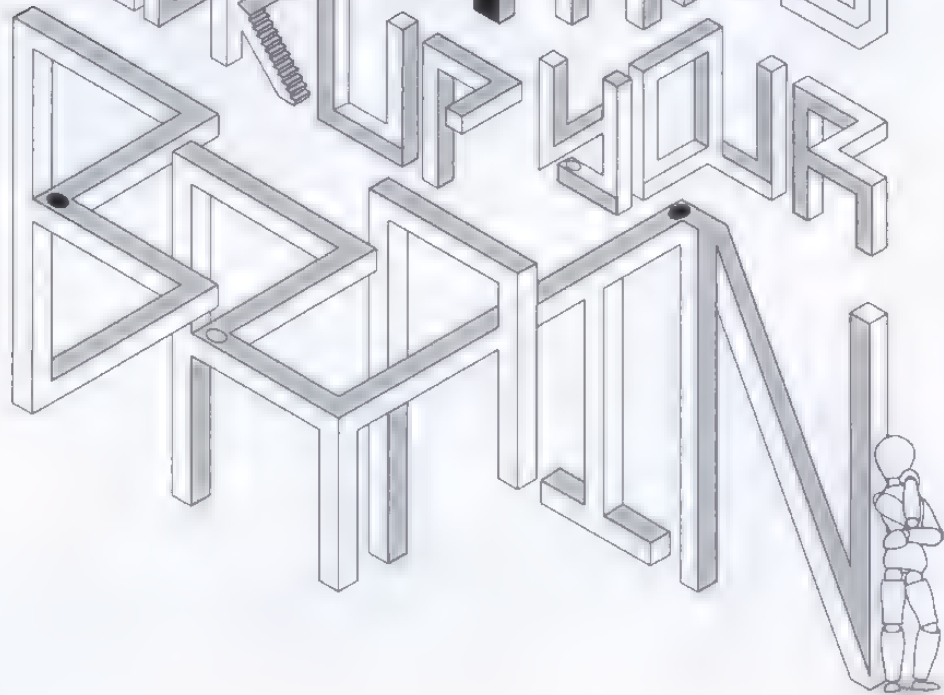
Splatterhouse
FORMAT 360, PS3 PUBLISHER BANDA NAMCO

Looking to prove there's no such thing as 'too desensitised', Banco announces the return of the original grossout. The good news. *Mark Of Kri* developer Bottlerocket is hacking it into shape

Rambo
FORMAT COIN-OP PUBLISHER SEGA

No arcade board has the particle effects to rival Stallone's head popping sequel, but then few movies could be better suited to a score attack. Two words that tell you everything anger meter

Spyborgs
FORMAT Wii PUBLISHER CAPCOM

Capcom looks west yet again, this time to Insomniac deserter Bionic Games. Due in 2009, *Spyborgs* couples Saturday morning cartoon looks with 'paradigm-shifting' Remote-controlled co-op

SimCity Creator
FORMAT Wii, DS PUBLISHER EA
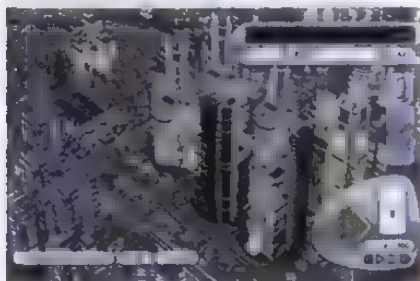
Urban expans on seems high on EA's agenda this year this console interpretat on suggesting that, while you don't *have* to destroy in order to build, a Remote makes it awfully attractive

Shaun White Snowboarding
FORMAT 360, PC, PS3, Wii PUBLISHER UBISOFT

The use of the *Assassin's Creed* engine a promise of breaking 'all former action sports game notions' and an emphasis on story it sounds a bit like Ubisoft. Skippable cutscenes, please

Crysis Warhead
FORMAT PC PUBLISHER EA
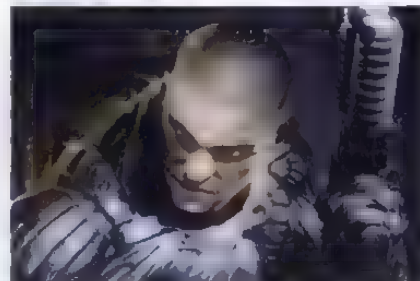
So, this is a bit confusing. mere weeks after Crytek claimed that it wouldn't be making any more PC exclusive games, t announces a new one, developed by its new subsidiary Crytek Budapest

Splinter Cell Conviction
FORMAT 360 PUBLISHER UBISOFT

Sam Fisher was on such good form at his publisher's recent press event that no one could spot him. But don't let the rumours of an urgent revamp put you off his last game was arguably his best

Infamous
FORMAT PS3 PUBLISHER SCE

A regular man suddenly granted superpowers, Dylan can't use guns because he'd set the gunpowder off. Luckily, he has an entire city that has fallen to chaos in which to play with them all

Ghostbusters
FORMAT 360, PC, PS3 PUBLISHER VIVEND

Opening with Slimer escaping to the bathroom in which he was captured it sounds like rampant physics-based proton pack destruction will come as early as the fan-favourite set pieces

---

INTERNET GAME OF THE MONTH

The official story behind this apparently abstract little RTS game is that you're attempting to take control of an asteroid belt with self-replicating mining machines, but you'd never know it.

For a start, your craft look like delicate insects and they emerge from fractal trees. But it's hardly a pacifist game the aim is to wipe out all opposition, which means swarming them with hundreds of your units. Once colonised, each planet generates craft at a different rate and with a certain combat strength and speed, but micro-management becomes moot once you're shifting 100-strong populations between asteroids with the elegant mouse-control system to defend against enemy incursions and develop attack forces.

The visual design, which sees asteroids perforated by intricate networks of tunnels and craft flowing around the map, is beautifully subtle - all procedurally generated - but be warned there's some ruthless opposition lurking beneath the sheen.

FEED IT ECHO CHROME
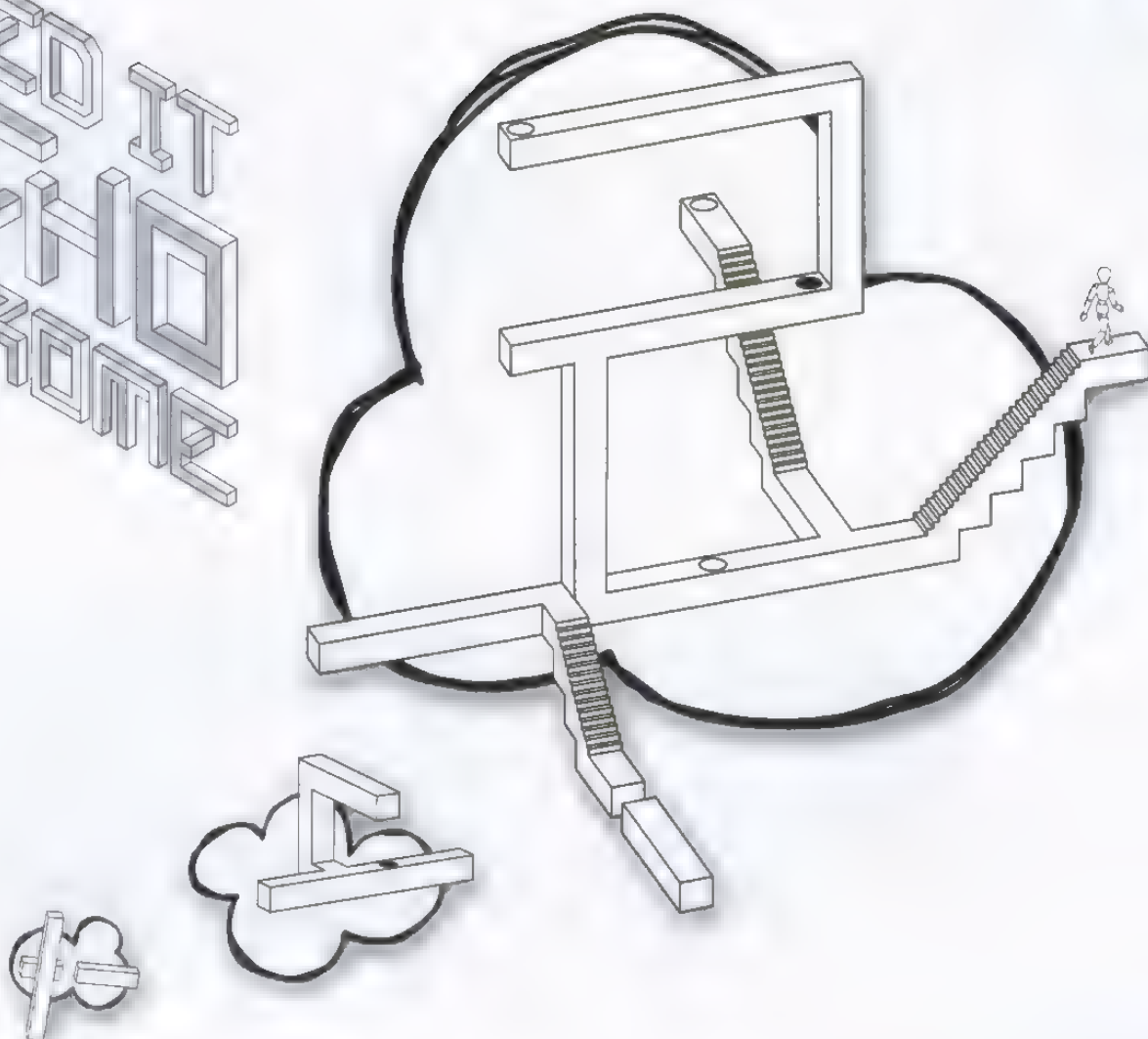
Your brain's mission is to guide the mannequin to its destination by tilting and turning the 3D puzzle and mastering these 5 perspective laws:

1) If two separate pathways look like they're touching, they are.
2) If a pathway looks like it's above another, it is.
3) When the mannequin jumps, it'll land on whatever's beneath it.
4) If a gap between two pathways is blocked from view the mannequin can stroll over it.
5) If a hole's blocked from view, it doesn't exist.

DOWNLOAD A FREE DEMO FROM
STORE.PLAYSTATION.COM

echochrome
A meal for the mind

PSP
PlayStation.Portable

Industry FOCUS
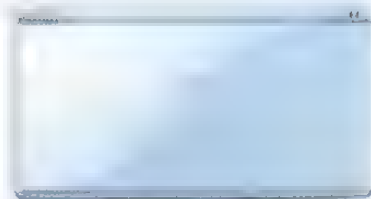
Western Europe 2007 software value – Nintendo versus Sony/Microsoft
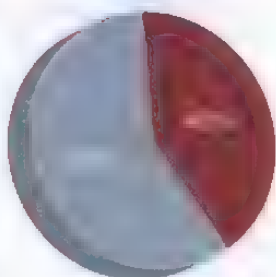
NINTENDO ▨
OTHERS ▮
Source: Screen Digest

Retailers eager for a slice of gaming pie

Analyst Piers Harding-Rolls discusses non-specialist retailers' blossoming love affair with games

Last month I discussed how well games retail was performing and that console sales cycles were fairly resistant to economic downturns. Growth has been prompted by the availability of all three current-gen consoles as we reach the meat of this console cycle, but has also been strongly driven by the introduction of new consumers.

According to Nintendo, more females than males play Wii and DS in Japan. This really underlines how Nintendo has changed its content and device strategy in recent years

While some of these new gamers will have been brought into the market tempted by the PS3's high-definition video playback or by the cheap price of the PS2 as it reaches the end of its lifecycle, Sony's impact on expanding the market has been somewhat limited when compared to the huge influx of new users of

Wii's consistently broad appeal can be measured by the number of column inches it has been given in mainstream media publications

both the DS and Wii. We can now clearly state that Nintendo has successfully translated a strategy first started with the DS into the home console market with much the same commercial results. The demographics of users for the Wii and DS are more far more widely spread than those of the competition.

According to Nintendo, more females than males play Wii and DS in Japan. This is a very significant revelation and really underlines how Nintendo has changed its content and device strategy in recent years – sometimes to the chagrin of Nintendo fans of old – and the impact it has had on its target market. Compare this to the other male-dominated devices and it is clear that Nintendo has expanded and continues to expand the handheld and console markets.

Likewise in Europe, the DS is a female-dominated platform and many of these female gamers are young girls – completely at odds with the PSP and other consoles. The Wii also has a wider and more even spread of user ages compared to the PS2, PS3 and 360. A significant share of users on the Wii are outside the traditional 18-35 demographic. Some of these 'gamers' are completely new to the market, but Nintendo has also been very successful in converting existing PC casual gamers – many of whom are female and over 35 – to its new lifestyle devices.

Importantly, Nintendo's strategy for market expansion and the capture of casual gamers has coincided with increased interest in games from those retailers outside of the specialist sector. Nintendo's new consumers are a strong fit with the mainstream shoppers who commonly enter these non-specialist retailers. As such, this convergence of market strategies has helped spur on Nintendo's sales dominance beyond the expectations of many industry commentators. Simply put, Nintendo, while helping open up the games market to mainstream users, has also ridden a wave of non-specialist retailer interest in the sector

Lerc: 69   4 5 pts
+9

Wii Fit is particularly appropriate for non-specialist retailers. It's an obvious fit with sports and leisure retailers, for instance, who can display it alongside their standard fitness products. This new spread of videogames into the wider market is unprecedented

UK retailers including Woolworths, Tesco and the rest of the supermarkets play a key role in expanding the market to traditional non-gamers, many of whom would not consider entering specialist games shops These retailers, and entertainment specialists such as HMV, also view the games market as a lucrative commercial opportunity at a time when other entertainment products such as music and standard-definition DVD are on the commercial wane The CD music market has been eroded heavily by falling prices and digital distribution, while the DVD market has been affected by falling prices, retailer competition and consumer trepidation caused by the introduction of high-definition video media. In commercial terms, games are viewed as a safe haven in the entertainment sector, a factor reinforced by the limited impact digital distribution is likely to have on the retail market over at least the next five years.

The mainstream adoption of games is evidenced by some of the most recent developments in retailer strategies for selling games. These include the re-branding of Woolworths stores to Wiiworths during the launch of *Wii Fit*, the increased shelf space allocated to games by HMV and the decision of Marks & Spencer to expand its games offering by stocking Nintendo software and hardware As sales channels for games expand into more generalised shopping environments, the demand from these sales partners for casual and lifestyle software will increase, which suggests that Nintendo will be increasingly well represented across a wide range of high street shops and supermarkets, strengthening its opportunity to build its market share through its chosen content strategy.
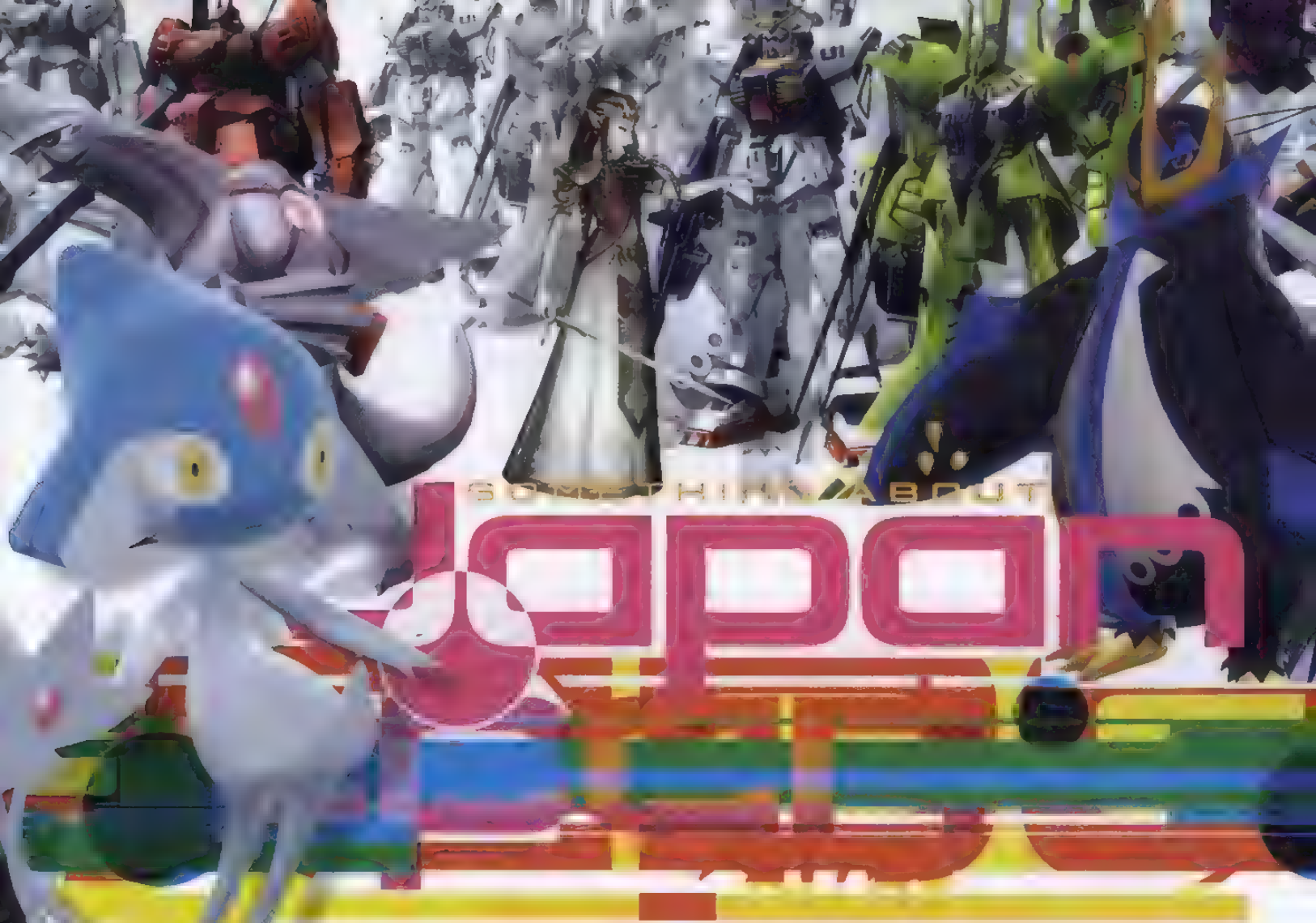
Mega merger in the west, calm in Japan

Famitsu's Koji Aizawa on the shrinking cost of the videogame drama

Well, exciting times for you all in the west. The big merger between Activision and Vivendi has been approved, and Activision Blizzard will soon come into existence. Instantly, there will be a company that overtakes EA as the biggest thirdparty publisher. It's quite a thing to think about, and has been big news in Japan.

But perhaps the reason for that is that there's little to compare it with in the Japanese videogame industry. Of course, if you look back over the past few years we can look at Square Co and the Enix Corporation becoming Square Enix in 2003, or the formation of Bandai Namco Games in 2005. But that's about all we can point at in our industry, and it has been noticeably quiet since then.

It's widely thought to be a time of consolidation in the videogame industry, so why isn't Japan following this trend? Actually, it is, but on a smaller scale. We can see this simply by looking at the good old software sales chart – but not on the surface. In terms of software in Japan, we find Nintendo at the very top, which of course includes the Pokémon Company. It's followed by Bandai Namco – composed of Bandai, Namco, Banpresto and Sunrise Interactive, then Square Enix (Square Co, Enix and Taito), Konami (Konami and Hudson)

Sega Sammy (erm... Sega and Sammy... Index (Takara Tomy, Atlus and Interchannel-Holon), and Dwango (Spike and Chunsoft). Outside of Nintendo, which itself has important subsidiaries, they're all component companies.

Now, if you consider companies that are not part of groups, then you'll perhaps think of names like Capcom, Koei, Level-5 or Tecmo. Level-5 is a bit of a special case, being a developer that very recently turned into a publisher. But as for the other three, they seem to stand tall despite the changes that took place in the industry. But that's not the whole story. Capcom has collaborated with Nintendo on its Zelda series, and used its expertise to develop the 3D action Gundam VS game for Bandai. Koei similarly worked in close collaboration

Smaller firms have shifted some of their development resources into collaboration with the bigger Japanese companies. The main reason behind this move is the huge increase in costs that this console generation has brought

with Bandai for Gundam Musou, and Tecmo is currently developing the new Zero for Wii with Nintendo (see page 47). They have indeed shifted some of their development resources into collaboration with the bigger Japanese companies. The main reason behind this move is, of course, the huge increase in development costs that this console generation has brought

The *Layton* games have helped to make Level-5 one of Japan's largest developers, and it's recently branched out into publishing

So there are now fewer game companies in the market. But at the same time, we could say that it helps bring some fresh air into the industry. These smaller companies have to look outside of the established genres, where the big boys tend to dominate, and consider things like the enormous popular success of DS and PSP – on these formats the level of risk is decreased and publishers can begin to consider a variety of markets, not just gaming but electronic dictionaries and other multimedia content, which is now a major genre of its own.

A good example of this is Level-5, which was well known for developing titles like *Dragon Quest VIII*, *Dark Chronicle*, *Rogue Galaxy* and so on. But it really gained in momentum with its *Professor Layton* puzzle adventure series for DS. The two games released so far on Nintendo's portable sold over 1.4 million copies in Japan alone – and Level-5 is a company with major status. But this is not an isolated case: you also find companies such as Flight-Plan with its *Summon Night* series, Tetsuya Mizuguchi's Q Entertainment, PAON, which has been founded mainly by former Data East employees, and the list goes on. Today's game development industry in Japan allows those developers to not only exist but, if they can find the right niche, to thrive and achieve the status of publisher.

If you look at the market share figures for DS and PSP, though, it's clear to see that this is a situation dependent on the widespread adoption of handhelds, and these companies will always have problems breaking into the truly major leagues of 360 and PS3 releases. That section of the industry today requires such huge investments – and if there's one guarantee with companies that taste success, it's that they want to grow. So despite my optimism over the success of these small companies, I feel like the day when some big mergers begin to take place in Japan might not be that far away.
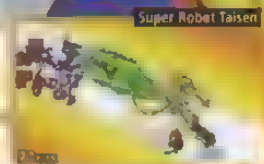
Weekly Famitsu (Enterbrain) Japanese sales May 26–June 1

Game/weekly sales/lifetime sales
1. *Powerful Pro Yakyuu Portable 3* (Konami, PSP): 109,436 (NE)
2. *Super Robot Taisen OG Saga* (Banpresto, DS): 90,248 (NE)
3. *Mario Kart Wii* (Nintendo, Wii): 49,899 (1,411,962)
4. *DCII PS* (Kadokawa Shoten, PS2): 44,938 (NE)
5. *Wii Fit* (Nintendo, Wii): 44,568 (2,128,809)
6. *Monster Hunter Portable 2nd G* (Capcom, PSP): 40,931 (2,210,213)
7. *Family Trainer* (BNG, Wii): 37,138 (NE)
8. *Valhalla Knights 2* (Marvelous, PSP): 34,562 (NE)
9. *Mana-Khemia 2* (Gust, PS2): 31,049 (NE)
10. *Clannad* (Prototype, PSP): 29,052 (NE)

Hype

The future of electronic entertainment

Edge's most wanted

Mafia II

Being the good fellas we are, it only takes a couple of chorizos, some tomato and an open world and, badda-bing badda-boom, you got us hungry for more
360 PC PS3 2KGAMES

Bayonetta

Hideki Kamiya makes a ballsy claim when he says the game will revolutionise the 3D action genre. Can a witch with guns on her feet kick it? Yes, we suspect she can
360 PS3 PLATINUM GAMES

APB

GTAIV-style online play is all well and good, but what we're really looking forward to is customising our character to look like Miyamoto and robbing banks in our pants.
PC TBA

Reheated genre pie
Developers need to come up with a different menu

Dead Space is dark. Lights flicker. Unseen creatures groan. Blood spatters the walls. But is this enough to scare us these days, or does conforming to a genre just swamp a game with familiarity and dampen the shock?

You might be forgiven for confusing Capcom's thirdperson sci-fi shooter, Dark Void, with EA's thirdperson sci-fi shooter, Dead Space. Admittedly, Capcom's game is set apart by its addition of aerial combat, and it doesn't lay on the horror as thickly as Dead Space – in fact, they will almost certainly prove to be entirely different experiences. It's just this: would anyone have noticed if the games ended up being called Dark Space and Dead Void instead?

The decision to so title these games can't be blamed only on a crippling failure of imagination, of course. The title Dead Space has been specifically chosen because it succinctly, and without the merest subtlety, signifies the genre into which the game is attempting to fit and, by extension, what feelings you should expect when playing it.

There is some value in being generic: as Dead Space puts a diligent check in each horror science-fiction tick box it associates itself with past experiences you've had. The seemingly deserted gantries and gun-metal corridors of Dead Space put you in mind of Alien and the creeping dread that film instils. The contorted creatures bring back memories of Carpenter's The Thing and Cronenbergian nastiness. You may just feel scared because of this. The problem is that scares by association only last so long.

Follow horror genre tropes too slavishly and it becomes a form of extravagantly gruesome dress-up rather than something genuinely horrifying in its own right. And it's not just horror: Fracture also serves up a brew of familiar imagery – chunky marines in armour, needlessly adorned with fibre-optics and chevrons. This may alert players to the exact kind of game they will experience, but it also carries the risk of saying to potential customers: 'You've played this many times before'.

You only need to look at the crisp aesthetics of a game like Mirror's Edge to see that an action adventure can be made even more alluring when placed in an environment which is so startlingly different from the dank ruins and gritty dystopias we so commonly see. And, whatever else you could say about its title, at least you can remember which game it refers to.

Facial expressions that appear
overexaggerated in screenshots look
perfect in motion – particularly satisfying
is each character's frozen rictus of pure
terror when an Ultra move is imminent

Street Fighter IV
Capcom's world warriors return – and find
a receptive audience ready to do it all again

There couldn't have been a better venue. Although it's been location testing in selected Japanese arcades for a while now, Capcom's decision to debut the near-final Street Fighter IV cabinets at its Captivate press event meant just one thing competition Assorted journalists and PR types, all from the SNES Street Fighter II generation, all with dim memories of the Tiger Knee and the Yoga Noogie all playing winner stays on You can't buy that kind of popularity

Familiarity with the old games helps Structurally, the game uses SFII as a template and builds outward, so virtually every combo and counter – from Ken's four fierce to Guile's air throw – work as they always did

The game uses SFII as a template, so virtually every combo and counter – from Ken's four fierce to Guile's air throw – work as they always did

After complaints from playtesters, the version shown at GDC – which used 3D collision detection – has been adapted to mimic the 2D hit-boxes of the original, so that crossover attacks and Dhalsim's stretching kicks feel the same as before Frills from later games – the air blocking from the Alpha series and the parries from SFIII are ignored to simplify things The decision was deliberate, and taken early. "As fun as it was for people like us who knew what we were doing," says producer **Yoshinori Ono** who also worked on the ill-fated Capcom Fighting Jam "parrying kind of started a trend where new users were afraid to get into the game. We love Street Fighter III and hope people will keep playing it on PS2, but Street Fighter IV is its own game "

So there are new features, but they build on the classic in a coherent, sensible way Easiest is tapping two buttons at once to use up a quarter of the Super gauge with an enhanced special move – a faster hurricane kick, say, or a double fireball that goes through other projectiles. More demanding is the Super Cancel, pulling off a special move and then repeating the stick/button command 'cancels' the initial move in favour of a bigger one Most difficult of all – at least to land – is each character's Ultra move, only available after they take a certain amount of damage, but rewarding players lucky or skilful enough to make them connect with extreme close-ups and immense amounts of damage All these moves were swiftly assimilated into most players' games – they are, after all, designed that way – but we have it on good authority that the thing to

master this iteration will be the Focus attack Launched by holding and releasing both medium attack buttons, Focus will protect the fighter doing it from one attack as it powers up, and stun an opponent if charged for long enough. Most players used them sparingly, but a tense three-round bout against Ono proved their effectiveness He compares the system to boxing, noting that "the skill is in reading your opponent's move before he starts moving"

Of the new characters, El Fuerte is the spiritual sibling of Virtua Fighter's El Blaze – apart from sporting masks and tights, the Lucha Libre stylists also share a penchant for running rings around opponents After a quarter-circle fireball sets him sprinting, Fuerte's got a reported 18 different offensive or defensive options – he's short on combos but makes up for it in guessing games Morbidly obese fanboy Rufus, meanwhile, has a belly sporting wobble physics that shame DOAX, but he's surprisingly quick for a fat lad, offering plentiful anti-air options and a spin that sucks in opponents MMA fighter Abel and SNK-inspired C Viper appear to have been toned down since earlier versions, but remained troublesome enough to throw a few veteran Guile players off their game Also announced – but unavailable – was new boss Seth, the CEO of M Bison's weapons division Silver-tinged and sporting 'body enhancements', he might seem best suited to the more stylised SFIII or the Marvel Vs Capcom series – but judgement is reserved until the final version In the meantime, it's more pleasing to speculate on rumours that Dan Hibiki and Fei Long have been spotted amid the game's concept art, suggesting that Capcom has far-reaching plans for future downloadable content. And

Rufus is an American fighter determined to prove his worth against Ken but his victory quotes betray a touch of the otaku. Every character has a taunt, but Vega can toss away his glove and mask mid-fight – the latter takes two chunks of super bar in the ultimate expression of contempt

Ryu remains the classic choice, while Feurte (below) is a Mexican chef – he arrives toting a frying pan – but often lapses into fighting-game Japanese. His losing yelp of 'Baka na!' – 'Idiot!' – caught on among attendees
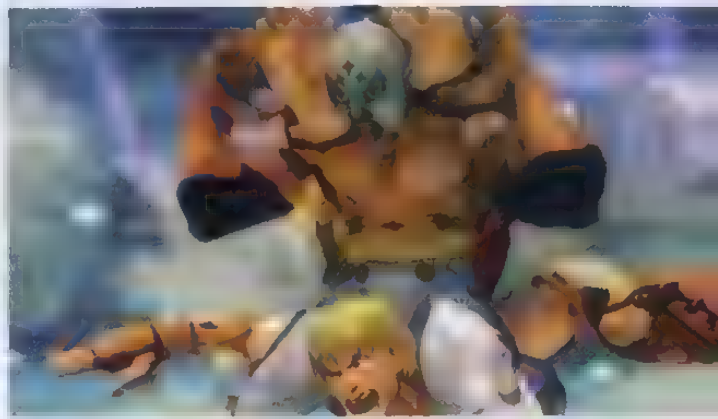
Backgrounds are as detailed as ever, and retain Capcom's weird sense of humour – for example, the young lady in yellow in the diner stage is actually a transvestite

there's always the question of online play how will *Street Fighter* cope when one frame of lag can lose an entire round? "Unfortunately, we're limited by physics data can only travel so fast over phone lines," says Ono. "We're focusing our resources on trying to hide lag – so we're thinking about things like predictive inputs where the game predicts what you're going to do ahead of time and pre-loads animations, that sort of thing. The key is to soften the blow of the lag rather than eliminate it, because that's not possible." Hopefully the system Capcom settles on will work – otherwise the only option is a flight to Japan, an arcade cabinet or a brace of Hori Arcade Pro sticks and some obsessive friends. But where to find them? Simple just look for anyone who was a teenager in the '90s. After all, as Ono says, "Even if you don't remember how to play *Street Fighter*, your thumbs and fingers do".

The original 12 characters retain their skills from *SSFII: The New Challengers* – so Ken's flaming shoryuken and E Honda's butt slam are still present and correct. A segmented Revenge gauge builds up as a character takes damage and, currently, certain Ultra moves hit with terrifying regularity while others are near-impossible to connect. Balancing continues

Who Gouken?

He's been rumoured to appear in *Street Fighter* games for years – usually with impossible victory conditions required to unlock him – but is Ryu and Ken's master finally set to make his debut? In Ryu's introductory animation, the wandering fighter comes across first Akuma, then *Street Fighter Alpha*'s Gen then a mysterious figure with a beard and a set of beads. Asked for comment, Ono would only say: "We can't really talk about that right now. I'll give you a hint we aren't putting a lot of non playable fighters into the animation." Intriguing.

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Crate expectations

As Tolstoy once said, all terrible tutorials are terrible in their own way. Fracture's is currently a variation on a theme; sadly, the theme in question is crates. Holding your hand from one box of toys to the next, you can't help but feel the game is wasting the opportunity to let you loose, just for a few minutes, to mess around in the world's largest sandpit. The importance of getting the tutorial right can't be overemphasised, either, as LucasArts plans on using it as a downloadable demo.

Fracture

LucasArts aims to mix gunplay with gardening

The worst case scenario is that Fracture may turn out to be one of the most unwittingly apt videogame titles since Breakdown broke down. As LucasArts' admirably experimental hi em up nears release it's starting to look like a game that's split straight down the middle a tectonic clash of a luringly risky innovation and staggering, arthritic cliche. It seems that LucasArts is scared that an audience will find the terrain-deforming gameplay unpalatably cerebral unless it's dressed up in a comforting apocalyptic familiarity a mixture of shaven heads, gritty attitude and phonebook-thick armour that may turn into a devastatingly effective cloaking device when Fracture appears alongside a dozen other interchangeable epics at retail.

That would be a real tragedy, because Fracture isn't a bad game by any yardstick – in fact, it often provides sparkling firefights and contains some clever level design. LucasArts' most recent reveal – hands on with the game's Alcatraz Island tutorial – is, in part, a testament to Fracture's ability to suck you in: we'd played through a hefty chunk before actual enemies had turned up, and we hadn't even noticed they'd been away.

But Fracture was always meant to be far more than just solid entertainment. It was meant to dazzle and amaze, introducing

terrain deformation as a new shooter standard to go alongside de Halo's rechargeable shield and two weapon slots (both of which Fracture cribs). The tutorial, however, gives worrying hints that even this early on, cracks may be starting to show.

The central problem is also, somewhat disconcertingly, the game's star: the ground-shifting arsenal, forever promising freeform fun but yet to convincingly deliver it. There may have been a miscalculation here revolutionary weapons (Half-Life 2's gravity gun comes instantly to mind) create astonishing possibilities because they are theoretically interesting in almost any context; weapons that allow you to alter the height of the ground have far more limited possibilities. In short, Fracture presents you with a specific key, and then throws up endless locked doors, tailor-made to be opened by it. It's no less ridiculous than if the game had given you a gun that fires brandy butter, before presenting you with a sequence of battlefields littered with thousands of ungarnished Christmas puddings. There are only so many situations you can face that just happen to require the floor to be at a slightly different height before the whole process starts to feel artificial.

More worryingly, when you deviate from the script the game freezes you out. You can raise a hill to get over a specific slope that's blocking your way but if you try hopping over the railing to the left instead you bump into invisible walls. Equally, throw a tower-spawning Spike Grenade beneath a mission-critical crate, and Fracture renders it a surprise dud – flatly refusing to play along with your mischief and loft the crate out of reach.

Part of the problem is that using a tutorial as a demo is a bit like trying to sell someone

The Ice Rifle is equally entertaining when turned on enemies, freezing them instantly ready for shattering. Sometimes your simplest urges should be rewarded
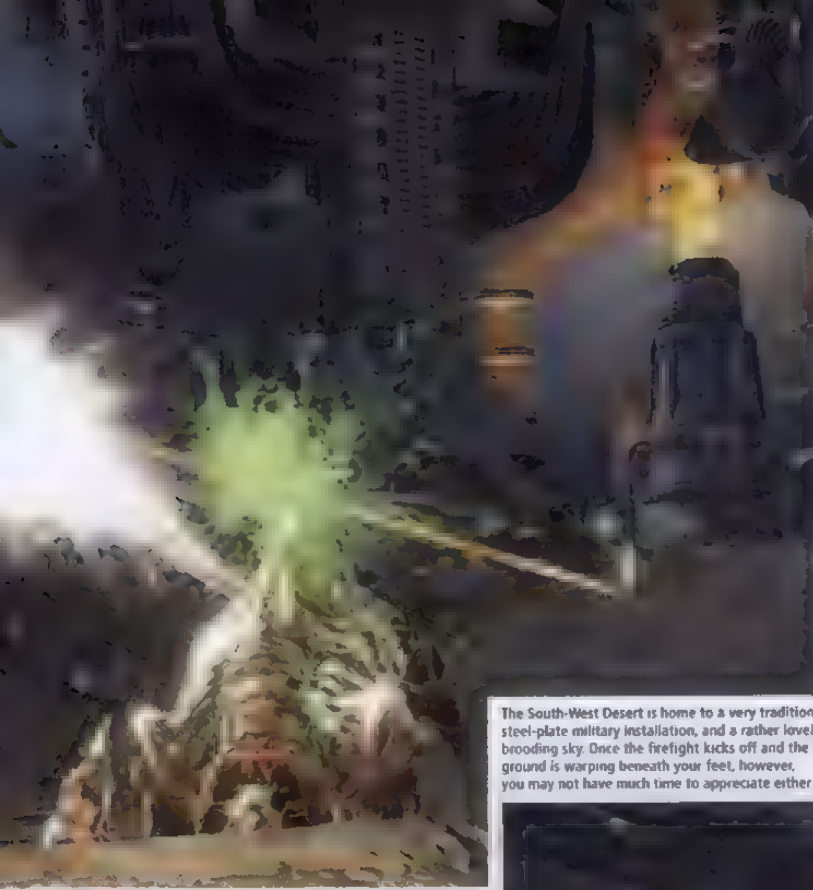
Day 1 ported *FEAR* to Xbox 360, so knows a little about AI – a good skill in a game doomed to tax conventional path-finding routines to breaking point. Lucky, then, that the team has built its own system
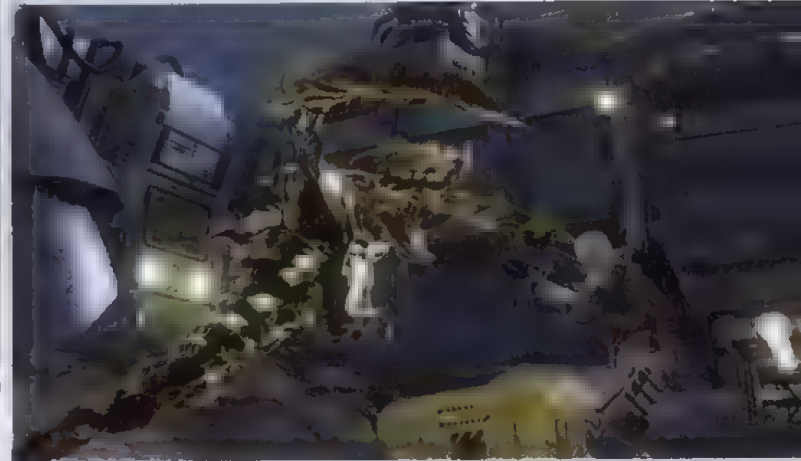
The South-West Desert is home to a very traditional steel-plate military installation, and a rather lovely brooding sky. Once the firefight kicks off and the ground is warping beneath your feet, however, you may not have much time to appreciate either

Multiplayer with room for 12 players could yet turn *Fracture* into an online classic. With conventional deathmatch and flag capturing already announced, an awful lot depends on the unique terrain-centric modes that have yet to be revealed

a Ferrari by showing off how nice the ignition key is. Tutorials are, by their nature, the most formulaic and controlled aspect of a game, and linearity is to be expected. Gaping inconsistencies are not, however, and its hard to believe that *Fracture* won't play the same tricks later on.

Watching a developer walk through part of the game's desert-based middle act, these fears initially seem confirmed: the same fierce linearity and the same uninspiring objectives (there's something depressing about being an earth-shifting supersoldier and finding yourself tasked with deactivating a couple of power generators). But things pick up with the arrival of a new weapon and a new enemy. The Ice Rifle is an inspired addition to the arsenal. Yang to the ground-flipping Entrencher's yin, it allows you to temporarily freeze sections of earth, either to lock cover in place, or stop enemies from raising their own. Creepers, viciously

Fracture's triumvirate of weapons, enemies and environments spontaneously creates experimentation. Hopefully LucasArts has more like this up its sleeve

deformed scorpions, are equally promising. Burrowing underground, they force you to use tools imaginatively, raising the earth to avoid attack, or scooping it out from under them. Suddenly *Fracture* has created a triumvirate of weapons, enemies and environments that spontaneously creates

experimentation. Hopefully LucasArts has more like this up its sleeve.

Fracture remains a game you'll want to love. At its best, it's genuinely innovative, and at its worst is never less than heartfelt. There's every chance that developer Day 1 could still do a *Portal*, mixing up simple

components until they create exciting results, even without it all; multiplayer will have to go very badly wrong to avoid being brilliant. The nagging feeling, however, is that in *Fracture's* case being first with a new concept may not necessarily mean claiming the trophy. It would be far from impossible for a competitor to take these innovations and turn them into something that really comes to life. It's sad to admit, but with *Fracture* still months away, the game we may really want is *Fracture 2*.

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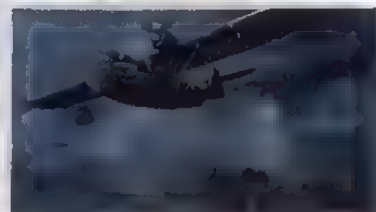
Call Of Duty: World At War

Treyarch goes beyond Infinity Ward and takes
the shooter franchise back to World War II

From the moment *Call Of Duty World At War* was formally announced, the game's creators had a new conflict on their hands. Treyarch's newest enemies were the massed ranks of *COD4* fanboys, and their message board assaults took two basic forms. Firstly: 'WTF have they gone back to WWII, again?' and then: 'WTF should we care about a Treyarch production when Infinity Ward's work on the franchise is teh bestest?'

The fanboys might not want to hear it but *World At War* has plainly been built with both these questions very much in mind. 'Some of our guys have been working on World War II games for longer than World War II lasted,' confesses Treyarch creative director **Richard Farrelly** at the game's European unveiling. So Treyarch knows, even more than most gamers, how deeply fatigue set in with the endless stream of post-*Medal Of Honor* titles based on the conflict. *World At War* is WWII via *Modern Warfare*, with

Treyarch having not only used Infinity Ward's *COD4* engine for the new game, but also taking pains to implement the wider lessons of its huge success.

Specifically, the team has taken note of how *COD4*'s polish and intensity enabled it to wow both casual console owners and hardcore FPS fans harbouring doubts about its depth. Rather than promise that *World At War*'s singleplayer mode will last longer than *Modern Warfare*'s, the developer simply insists that any levels or sections that aren't good enough will be dumped rather than kept in as padding. Rather than revert to the multiple-bullet kills and spindly bayonets, Treyarch has assembled a WWII weapon-set intended to give the player the same sense of power that *COD4*'s 21st-century arsenal does – the likely star a flamethrower designed to destroy not only Japanese guerrillas, but also the jungles. In place of muddy trenches and barren battlefields, the new environments ooze cinematic sheen and atmosphere.

Treyarch is armed with anecdotes to prove how obsessive it is about the details: it built a scale model of a WWII aircraft in order to accurately recreate its interior

The one area in which *World At War* can effortlessly and indisputably claim superiority over *Modern Warfare* is in geographical and historical authenticity. Treyarch has rifled through technical blueprints, built lifesize vehicle models to ensure in-game accuracy and consistent scale, and indulged in obsessive and painstaking audio recordings of period weaponry. Indeed, the biggest obstacle to *COD4*-sized success might be its admirable aim of creating a new WWII game that doesn't retread the same old battlefields, and instead focuses on lesser-known fronts. It's difficult to square the notion of the 'definitive' WWII experience with a title that appears confined to one big city and a few islands.

World At War will extend and evolve *COD4*'s perks system and offer multiplayer maps informed by the focus and success of its predecessor's, while vehicles and on- and offline co-op modes are the most obvious additions. It will feature splitscreen, multi-monitor and online co-op modes for up to four players. Some singleplayer sequences will be omitted from co-op, such as an air-and-sea battle with mounted guns, in which the strategic point of the level is to switch between four guns during an attack. With four human gunners, it just wouldn't be quite the same.

Rumble in the jungle

New environments and weapons aside, the other key change promised for *Modern Warfare* will be in the way Japanese soldiers attack. At the beginning of development, Treyarch tested the old Nazi soldier AI in the dense new Pacific atoll environments, but found it didn't work. A new system was devised to reflect the guileful ways in which the emperor's troops exploited their surroundings and obeyed bushido-influenced honour codes rather than borrowing others' more measured approaches to success and surrender. Treyarch says players will have to resort to the same weapon the American troops did to repel the forest fighters – the flamethrower – and concedes also that correct balancing of the weapon will be absolutely crucial.

Modern Warfare took place in fictional, if intentionally familiar, modern battlezones, while World At War aims to recreate real battles in the Pacific, in and around Berlin
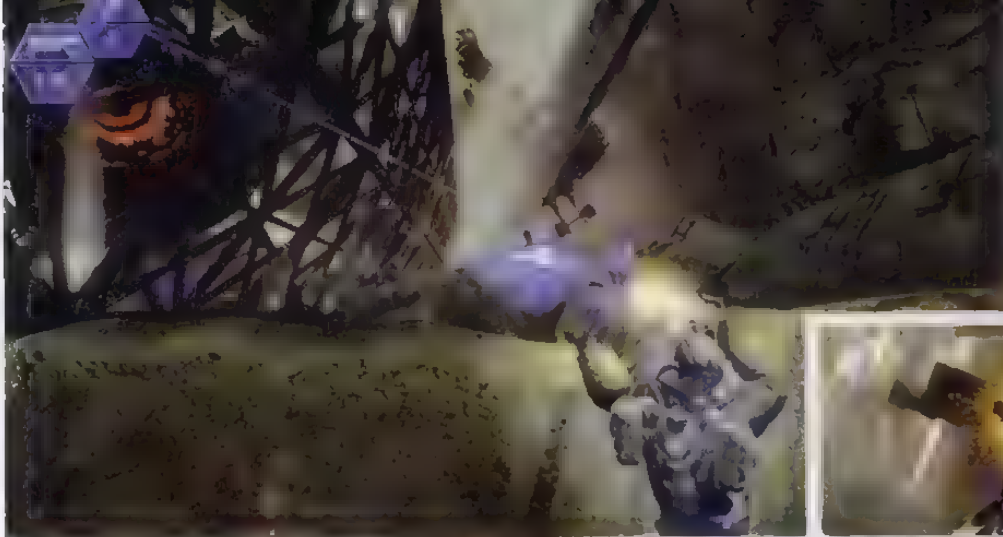
Dark Void

Bringing down the bad guys when the only way is up

To admit you were wrong takes courage to do it four months into development in the production-milestone strewn world of games takes, if not madness, at least the sort of zeal normally only associated with polar explorers But that's what fledgling studio Airtight Games did after first showing *Dark Void* to Capcom, deciding to ditch parachuting, giant robots motorbike sections and pyramids in favour of... something.

About a week later, *Dark Void*'s new USP had been hit upon: vertical cover combat. A 90° twist on the gunfights seen in *Gears Of War* and *GTAIV*, the system sees the camera take a stomach-lurching twist whenever hero Will reaches one of the game's many cliffs and spires From there, he climbs with the sort of agility most heroes can't manage on the ground, ducking behind ridges and outcrops as he clings on and shoots He can retrace his steps downwards – not recommended for vertigo sufferers – but the objective is invariably to reach the top, where he can deploy his hoverpack One of the few design ideas that survived the cull, this is where the game shows its flair – perhaps not surprising, given that several of the Airtight team worked on the *Crimson Skies* franchise Will's a pilot – he's in the Void, a parallel universe, after naively flying into the Bermuda Triangle – and knows how to handle himself in the air. Once he's acquired the pack, he can use it at any time – for instance, to flank dug-in enemies from the skies – but control's tricky enough to make it
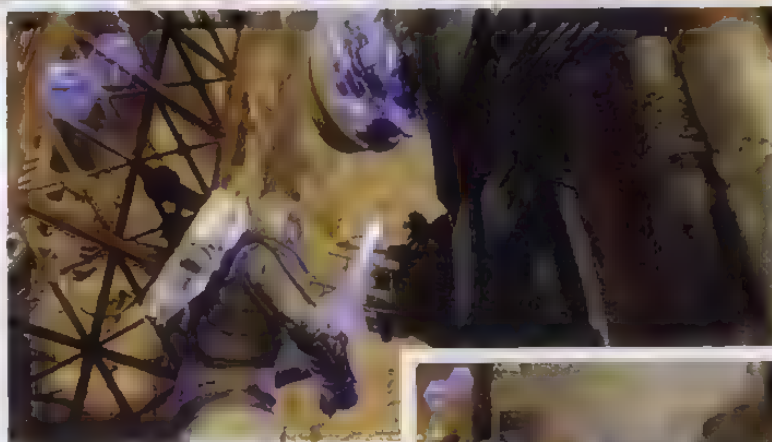
FORMAT **360, PC, PS3**
PUBLISHER **CAPCOM**
DEVELOPER **AIRTIGHT GAMES**
ORIGIN **US**
RELEASE **WINTER**

The enemies are aliens in metal suits, not the robots they may look like – a deliberate decision to make the combat more involving

a dangerous prospect in more claustrophobic environments limiting its usefulness to open spaces Once airborne, Will can undertake a controlled plummet to reach new areas or weave between spires with the help of boost, but flight time is limited Halfway through the game he'll acquire a jetpack allowing for nimbler sky combat, but the best option early on is to skyjack one of the opposition's stylised UFOs. This prompts a grip-based minigame that echoes *Shadow Of The Colossus* – and, in fact, Airtight hints that the game's bosses will also pay homage to Team Ico's masterpiece, with Capcom veteran Keiji Inafune describing them as the first Japanese-style bosses seen in a western game Once the UFO is under control, combat enters familiar dogfighting territory, including special moves like the barrel roll and Immelman turn that should be familiar to *Skies* fans. Little else is on show at the moment, but with a year of development left Airtight has already ruled out multiplayer and co-op – allowing it to concentrate on a solo story that should, hopefully, do more than just upset acrophobics.

Early in the game, Will falls in with a group of humans known as the Survivors – much of his kit is made of scavenged alien goods

Cast into the Void

"We had a motorbike engine that worked fine," says Ed Fries, formerly of Microsoft, recently of *WOW* modelling company Figure Prints and now heading up Airtight Studios "Lots of stuff had to go. The trouble is, when we came up with [vertical cover], we had to redesign whole levels to take advantage of it, and that meant rewriting the story."

Far Cry 2 sports a segmented health system much like that of *The Chronicles Of Riddick: Escape From Butcher Bay*. A segment will recharge if not entirely depleted, and you can find syringes which restore health to full

Far Cry 2
Or how to make friends and immolate people

What are friends for? In *GTAIV* they act as the keys to progression, doling out missions and rewarding you with abilities – all the while lending the world a persistence that makes it feel alive. In firstperson shooter *Far Cry 2* they act similarly, giving meaning and a loose structure to the game's huge open world. But they differ in two fundamental respects: they can be struck from the script at any moment by a hail of gunfire, and you don't ever have to take them bowling.

There are 12 such characters in the game, of which the nine men are playable – when you select one to play as he is effectively removed from the storyline and given over to the player as a blank slate.

"The remaining buddies are randomly seeded into the world at the beginning," explains Ubisoft Montreal's creative director **Clint Hocking**. "They're mostly being held captive by someone, somewhere, although there are a few that are found just through

exploration. You will be sent at the very beginning of the game on at least one mission to rescue a buddy. If you succeed and they live, you can meet them in the safehouses you've unlocked and they'll offer optional ways to do missions.

During our time with the game, Irishman Frank Bilders asks us to blow up a pipeline on the outskirts of a jungle. Another buddy, Warren, offers to give us a hand if we find ourselves in trouble. Should we be shot down, Warren will now appear to drag us from combat and patch us up, but in so doing puts his own life at risk. Such a safety

net is worth having, however – combat in *Far Cry 2* is no breeze. Guns jam and run out of bullets frequently. Enemies are rarely down in a single shot, and react to their surroundings shrewdly. This makes them formidable opponents, but also means that positioning and geography make fights play out differently depending on the angle of attack. It turns the openness of the world into a source of emergent tactical possibility, particularly when combined with the use of fire to cut off enemies' access to their redoubt, or funnel them to their deaths.

Of course, fire isn't easily controlled in parched grassland, as we discover when our overzealous use of Molotov cocktails turns a militia outpost into a barbecue. We escape by fleeing across a bridge in a jeep, moments before it is consumed by flames. If the level of world detail we saw in the hands-on demo at Ubidays is indicative of the game as a whole, then Ubisoft Montreal has created an Africa bustling with diversion, a place that feels populated and dynamic. How they interaction with NPCs knits each mission into the wider experience remains to be seen, but that kernel of the game – the world itself, how you move through it, who you shoot and what they do next – has been realised with acumen. We hope our buddies can live up to it.

Enemies aren't always easy to spot among the foliage – the dappled shade of the jungle breaking up their outlines. Even when you've put one down, they can still be a threat – firing at you with a sidearm until rescued

Immediately noticeable are the iterative changes to navigation – the map, which the player holds in front of him rather than deferring to a menu screen, automatically finds the correct scale and points of interest that you've spotted through your telescope are instantly marked. Other navigational aids become apparent in the world itself – signposts that point toward your objective are painted red – all such measures designed to direct the player without resorting to intrusive HUD elements or separate screens that pull the player out of the fiction.

There's a slight delay to your movement that makes you feel like you're in possession of a weighty body. After running, it takes a moment before you can bring up a gun, and even longer to draw a bead – effective aiming requires the use of iron sights or scopes

Although there's all the scripting and bottlenecks that come with the territory, the game allows for a variety of approaches, and finding in-game treasures give you experience points to level up Summer's skills. It's not too late for Replay to add a selection of unlockable pyjamas

Velvet Assassin
Human tragedy zips up its leather catsuit as World War II gets personal

Violette Szabo's life story is so strikingly unlikely it could only be true. widowed in 1942, the perfume counter salesgirl immediately became an Allied secret agent and was parachuted into occupied France to help with resistance efforts. Her second mission ended with her capture, torture, rape, internment in a concentration camp and subsequent execution in 1945. She was 23. She's back from the dead now, however, as inspiration for Violette Summer, saboteur heroine of Velvet Assassin

At a recent developer walkthrough, Replay announced that it sees Violette as the antidote to unrealistic, oversexed videogame cybervixens everywhere, before flipping PowerPoint slides to reveal the plucky resistance heroine in two highly functional outfits, a skin-tight leather catsuit and a rather fetching thigh-length nightie.
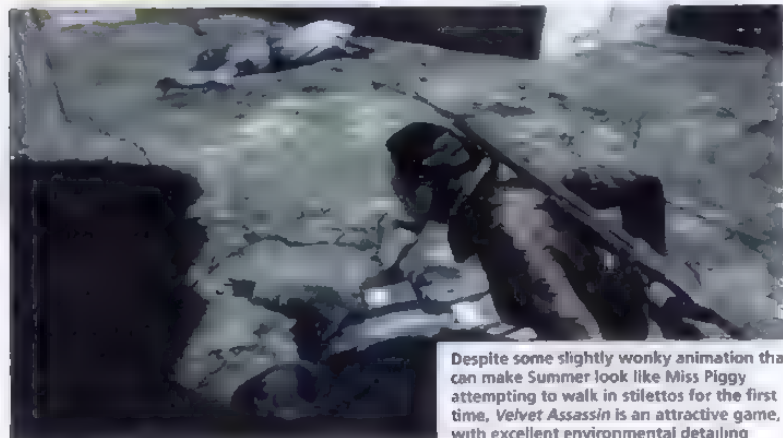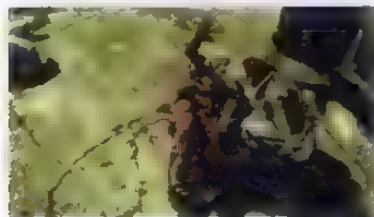
It's enough to make you suspect that Szabo may have died in vain, but a deeper look at the game behind the wardrobe suggests otherwise. Velvet Assassin's story is told in flashbacks, as Summer slips in and out of consciousness in a hospital bed. The setting is carefully indistinct, however, hinting that some manner of Second Sight trickery may be afoot as the plot progresses.

The main bulk of the game certainly seems to be more conventional. After the hospital, we're shown a mission set in Warsaw, occurring about halfway through the story, in which Summer must make her way to a Nazi-held prison, delivering a cyanide pill to a captured colleague. It's a promisingly downbeat agenda, perfectly matched with the ruined autumnal city, a carefully planned minefield of enemy patrols and deep shadow. The latter is a natural ally, and the game projects a violet haze around Summer when she's hidden. It's a binary system - she's either safe or spotted - and works well with the back-to-basics design Replay has chosen to trade AI realism for a toybox solidity: these soldiers have short memories when it comes to leather-clad sex-bomb insurgents, and the rigid paths they follow are there to turn every encounter into a puzzle. It's not the most ambitious agenda, then, but it panders brilliantly to the obsessive-compulsive's craving for experimentation and route optimisation. The focus of the demo, an unexpected roadblock with four patrolling guards, proves a case in point: risk sneaking past, pick them off one at a time, or try pulling the pin from a passing soldier's grenade, timing it to take out his colleagues with the blast? It's contrived, certainly, but also full of potential.

On top of this is Summer's fondness for morphine, a burst of which can temporarily freeze time, letting you find a better hiding spot, or even move in for a stealth kill. In addition to the over-arching structure, it also briefly transforms Summer back into that nightie, and sends a blotchy blast of blood cells swimming across the screen.

Replay's ultimate aim is to provide a more personal window into World War II. "Have you seen Schindler's List?" the Gamecock representative running the demo asks, trying to sum up the developer's approach as he guides his leather-jumpsuited, purple-mist enshrouded supermodel Power Ranger through a Krypton green sewer. We have, as it happens, and it didn't look a lot like Velvet Assassin. But that's not necessarily a problem, because Velvet Assassin still looks a lot more interesting and original than many of our recent forays into Nazi Germany.

A noir voiceover often intrudes at just the wrong moments and - Bogart would choke on his Bourbon - often states the obvious. The flashback structure still has lots of potential, however

It's shocking to think that Szabo's peril-packed life was over by the time she was Avril Lavigne's age. Yet Replay has chosen not to capitalise on this, upping her from 23 to somewhere in her 30s on the grounds - ironically - of plausibility. Other changes, which creative director Sascha Jungnickel refers to as "her big boobs and killer ass" have a simpler lineage: rare directives from the top men at Gamecock. Let's hope they never get hold of that Mother Theresa licence

Despite some slightly wonky animation that can make Summer look like Miss Piggy attempting to walk in stilettos for the first time, Velvet Assassin is an attractive game, with excellent environmental detailing
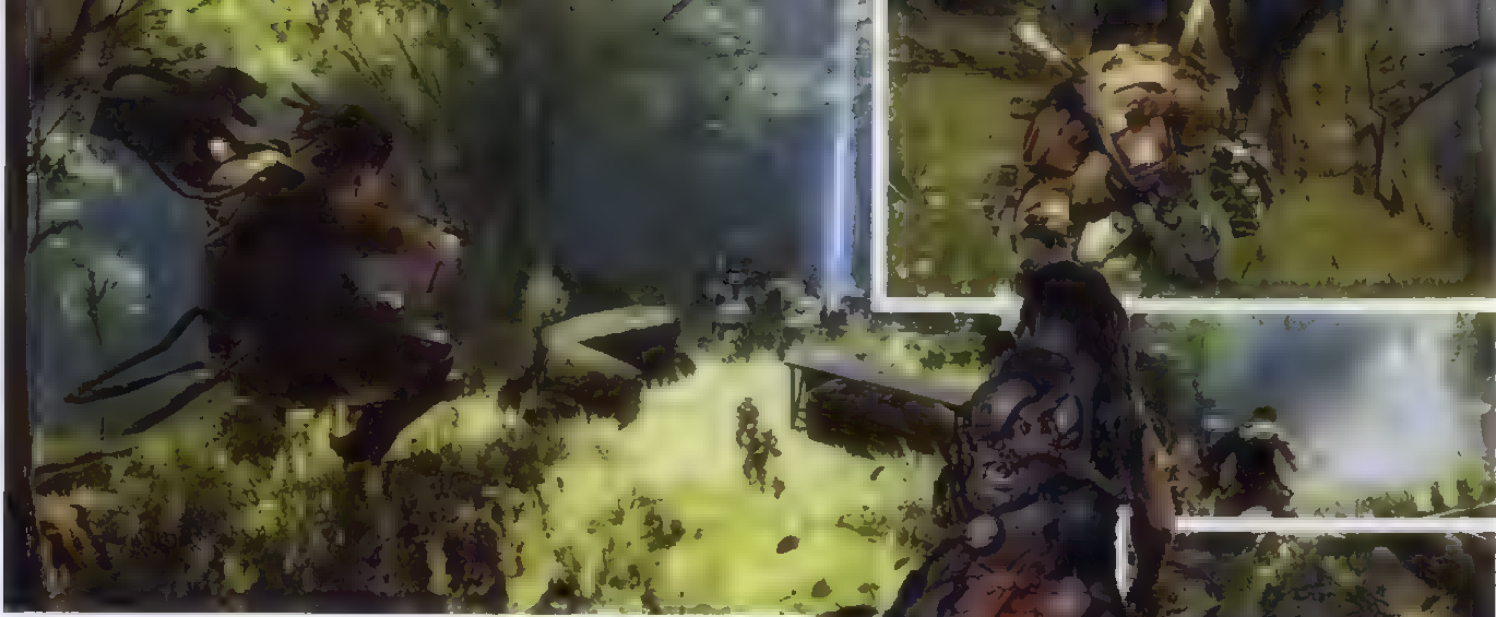
Bionic Commando

Our heavily armed hero jumps back into action, but this time there isn't a Nazi to be seen

Our hero has a typical videogame backstory – on the day of his execution, a convenient terrorist attack means he's thrown back into the fray

"We tried it without a jump button," explains Capcom producer **Ben Judd** as Nathan Spencer, star of the original Bionic Commando, hurdles across rooftops, dreadlocks bouncing in the breeze. It just wasn't much fun.

Fun, after all, is what having a grappling hook surgically grafted to your arm is all about. The new haircut, the jumping: these might seem like sacrilegious changes to an 8bit classic, but there's more to the new Bionic Commando than unfair Spider-Man with-guns comparisons suggest. For starters, some of the original's legendary difficulty remains – finding a stable lock-on point for your grappling hook takes more than a jump and a squeeze of the shoulder button. Flyovers, girders and buses all provide a decent hook, but anything smaller – a boulder, say, or a family saloon – might topple on to Nathan's head as soon as he puts his weight on the cable. Cars can be reeled in, but if they plummet off a ledge they'll drag our hero with them. Conversely, Nathan can use the same loose interpretation of physics to his benefit – the zip line effect that lets him scale buildings with his hook

Nathan's been designed with an emphasis on movement – hence the lively hair and all the straps. There's a degree of auto-aim, but it's more effective along the vertical axis, allowing for precise shots while swinging

A call to arms

Another key part of the Bionic Commando revival is the release of a polished, updated version of the 8bit game with the subtitle Rearmed, also produced by Grin. The gameplay holds up better than many platform games from the same era – although as with the recent PSP version of Castlevania, modern fans might find its difficulty terrifying. "The decision to have the grapple fire diagonally and not straight forwards was remarkably forward-thinking for a 2D game," says Judd, "it was the first platformer to make you look up." Sadly, one aspect of the classic hasn't made the cut – a purge of Nazi imagery means the final boss is now an M Bison lookalike rather than Hitler.

Health is dealt with in the classic Call Of Duty style – blood smears on the screen signal that it's time to hide for a couple of seconds. An adrenaline meter makes special moves possible

turns into a vicious dropkick when the other end's attached to an enemy. Alternatively, the same enemy can be dragged in and used as a human shield, whirled around Nathan's head like a mace, knocked up into the air and punched towards other enemies, or simply held in place and perforated with the weighty Hiker shotgun. More advanced tactics will be required for the bosses, designed with input from Capcom's Japanese studios and typically taking up the same space as a semi-detached house – some will need to have large objects lobbed at them, others must be chased across the game's sprawling terrain. Cheekily, developer Grin limits exactly which bits of scenery can be grappled by designating certain areas irradiated – and therefore impossible to grab – but the checkpoints and difficulty curve seem forgiving enough to forestall irritation.

And all of this, of course, will be good practice for the just-announced multiplayer mode, where everyone plays as a brightly suited FSA agent rather than squabbling over who gets to be Nathan. Game types are traditional – capture the flag, deathmatch and the like – but arenas are designed like giant jungle gyms. They're slightly smaller than the game's regular levels, but far more hazardous – if you're zip kicked off a ledge in one of the flooded maps, you'll have one mid-air shot at saving yourself with your bionic arm before the same attachment drags you to a watery grave.

And there's one final incentive for fans of the original: having the forthcoming Bionic Commando Rearmed on the hard drive will unlock content, including an orange-haired, flak-jacketed 'classic' skin for Nathan. Although he'll still be able to jump

Soul Calibur IV

Vader and co join the ranks of sabre rattlers

The first thing to say about Soul Calibur IV is that it's a beautiful game. That might be the second thing to say as well, just to emphasise the point, but that doesn't mean it's just a shallow looker. Some minor clipping issues aside, which will hopefully be tided up in the few development weeks left, the bright colours and sheer detail in the backgrounds can be jaw-dropping. The antialiasing is a triumph with no jagged edges on the smooth motions of the fighters, and the framerate is flawless. It's enough, in fact, to make you coo a little at the screen.

Enough of that. The fighting has also been spruced up after the disappointing third instalment, and is much more aggressive this time around – weapons move quickly, and variation will quickly break through even the most determined block. Fights can be over very quickly, and the emphasis – at least in our preview code featuring four of the final characters, Mitsurugi, Hilde, Siegfried and Darth Vader – was most definitely on attack as the best form of defence.
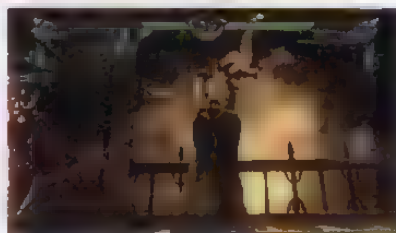
Notable for its absence was the new, much-talked-about Critical Finish. This move is an instant kill, enabled when all three pieces of a character's armour are removed. To break off armour the opponent needs to be blocking, and in our matches this never happened to the degree required to remove all three sections there is obviously skill required in the lopping-off, but blocking isn't of the importance that it is in, say, Virtua Fighter. It may be the case that in high level brawls this feature comes into play, but for the majority of players it will be a peripheral if visually spectacular part of the experience.

There's a focusing eplayer quest which is guaranteed to be full of cheesy drama and hammy voice acting. Sandwiched between this and the versus mode is the grandly titled Tower of Lost Souls, a new mode that takes inspiration from certain other fighters by offering rewards for overcoming particular fighting conditions. These, in turn, will allow you to further customise in the character creation mode beyond the basic options critical because the appearance of your fighter affects their fighting style and strengths. This works much as you'd expect bulkier armour giving more protection but making you slower, but its very existence may do more to differentiate SCIV than any number of licensed characters.

The most consistently used marketing angle for SCIV is, of course, the presence of Star Wars characters, split across the formats (see 'You're fired!'). But Darth Vader, the PS3 bonus, suggests there might be some disappointment: though the character model certainly resembles the old rogue, neither his movement nor moves seem to quite fit with the films. There's little grace or deadly power but a bludgeoning style full of kicks and wild Lightsaber swings. Obviously he had to be made to work as a game character, but here he appears to be caught between two stools not as powerful or quick as the other characters, not quite enough like Darth Vader to mitigate that.

That minor disappointment aside, however, SCIV is looking like a fine addition to the series. After the insipid third, and the frankly abysmal Legends spin-off, this bulky and beautiful brawler should put Soul Calibur back where it belongs.

We may be a little critical of Vader, but at least he's memorable the recent announcement of a cross-promotion with The Force Unleashed that sees that game's apprentice figure, Starkiller, making an appearance is much worse news. Quite apart from The Force Unleashed itself, the Starkiller character is a literal embodiment of anodyne character design, utterly generic and boring. One of Soul Calibur's defining features is that the characters and their different weapons require noticeably different approaches to even the basics, and actually have some visual pizzazz that's their own. The Star Wars characters look a little limp in this company.

The incidentals in the backdrops occasionally take your mind off the deadly weapons being waved in front of you – the elephant from the gloomy circus (above) is especially beautiful
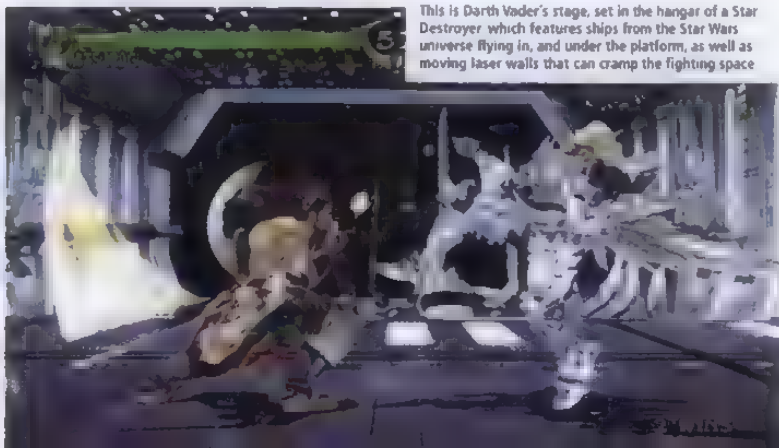
This is Darth Vader's stage, set in the hangar of a Star Destroyer which features ships from the Star Wars universe flying in, and under the platform, as well as moving laser walls that can cramp the fighting space

Los Angeles' online modes are under wraps, but if they're not to be made redundant by the apparent breadth and depth of the singleplayer experience, or trumped by Burnout Paradise's post-release endeavours, they'll need to be sturdier than GTAIV's

Midnight Club: Los Angeles

More of the same. But when it looks this good, do we care?

W hat do you do when Test Drive Unlimited has made cruising for road race rivals an elegant art, Burnout Paradise has turned an already huge racing brand out into an open world, and Forza 2 has taken cosmetic car customisation to unbeatable extremes? If you're Midnight Club, you don't panic. You just keep doing what you always did, only more so. Initial impressions of Midnight Club: Los Angeles suggest that Rockstar San Diego has not only employed the RAGE engine that powered GTAIV, but also adopted a similar design philosophy. Los Angeles isn't about shoehorning in new ideas so much as it is about using the scale sheen and seamlessness offered by the current generation of consoles.

Anyway, tacked-on gimmicks would have been rather beside the point. The entertainment capital of the universe is the real star turn in the new Midnight Club. The game's LA isn't a street-for-street recreation of the city, more a kind of compressed recreation of its geography and landmarks with the city's scuzzier south-of-the-river side left out altogether in favour of the posher buildings and citizens of the north. Despite that, it still feels like a vast automotive playground, with around three times the total raceable space covered by all three of Dub Editions cities.

In addition to the feast of landmark-spotting, Los Angeles features a much more powerful and convincing pedestrian presence than in previous games, and a richer range of spot effects around collisions enhance the sense of the concrete and steel of the city itself. The polluted beauty of the LA sky is celebrated in striking, even romantic, day-to-night phases. Examined element by element, Midnight Club might not match the car models or architectural elegance of a Burnout Paradise or a PGR4, but taken as a whole it promises a sense of engagement with a city environment not seen since the days of Crazy Taxi and Driver.

The race modes and modifications we were able to explore in the current 360 build were largely familiar from Dub Edition, but a host of new, yet-to-be-revealed online modes and GTA-style delivery missions are yet to be revealed in detail. Los Angeles also has a new approach to the frustrating difficulty spikes and too-tough opponents that so often prevent gamers from continuing to progress in traditional singleplayer racing structures.
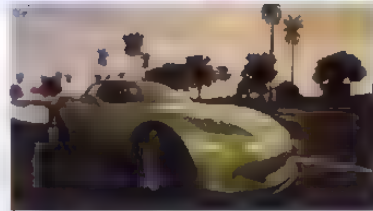
Los Angeles' car models, citizens and architecture might not always match the licensed majesty or accuracy of some of its rivals, but it does boast a rich atmosphere

As well as winning money for races, players gain 'reputation points' which open up new classes, options and modes – and mean even a driver who keeps coming last can get through the game. No single race has to be won in order to progress. It still has to keep the solo player interested, though and Los Angeles is so approachable and user-friendly that, paradoxically, it might not be as compulsive as some of its more traditionally structured precursors.

Elsewhere, there's a welcome, stylish lack of fussiness. The livery editor, like the under-the-bonnet details is about efficacy and expertly chosen decals rather than a blank canvas for extreme Forza-style fine art. Transitions between the brilliant Google style map and the city streets are handled with economy and elegance – no spurious animations, stat screens or fiddly interfaces. The message seems to be that, once your franchise is finally within reach of its original promise of freedom to race through a famous, living city, any further enhancements' only get in the way.
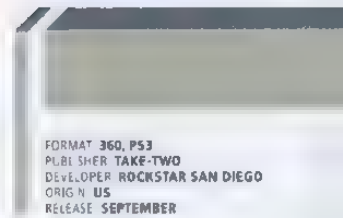
The stylish cartographer

Open worlds may be all the rage these days, but the pursuit of freedom isn't always matched by efforts to ensure that the player isn't left stranded and confused by too little direction and too much choice. A tool to be used alongside its perfectly functional in-race radar, Midnight Club: Los Angeles' modern city map is the perfect counterpoint to its bustling gameworld, and zooms seamlessly from abstracted topography to street-level bustle. Locating and differentiating between missions, plotting routes and finding your bearings all feel straightforward. Los Angeles' map system looks more refined and useable than stablemate GTAIV's, let alone the tangled and cluttered navigation 'help' that sometimes made No More Heroes' streets and missions such a chore.

New interiors and liveries are as covetable and easy to apply as ever, and the no-nonsense approach is entirely in keeping with the emphasis on action over tweaking

Tomb Raider: Underworld

Lara meets a kraken amid the open Mediterranean Sea in an adventure that's set to get the old girl exploring again

U nderworld is Crystal Dynamics' third mission on its quest to extinguish the unhappy memories left by Angel Of Darkness. And as the first ed on 360 and PS3 – though, naturally, Underworld will also hit Wii, PS2 and DS – Lara's animation continues to improve, as seen in a recent reveal of its Mediterranean level, the second in the game by creative director Eric Lindstrom. More important, and perhaps to counter the rollercoaster charms of Uncharted, is the fact that the developer has sharpened the focus on exploration after the more action-oriented Legend, Lara's last original outing. "Underworld takes the best of both worlds by presenting a highly charged action experience driven largely by player exploration," he claims.

The level opens with Lara in scuba gear on a boat in the middle of the Med, mountains just visible in the distance. The only way to go is down, as Lara descends through the fathoms, the sea bed slowly resolves itself in the deep gloom. "Lara Croft is an explorer and we wanted to see her go to new and unexpected places that would make people sit up in their chairs," says Lindstrom. "Going to remote parts of the world to discover a new ruin is very cool, but learning that the ruin you're looking for is on the ocean floor is even more exciting." Lara's exploration-based puzzles take on a whole new dimension in the ocean, which is populated with sharks and jellyfish.

I hope it doesn't sound too existential but isn't it more important to feel free than to actually be free? asks Lindstrom, referring to the way the open ocean is implemented in the game. Though Lara can swim in any direction, she'll flip around and swim back when she reaches the edge of the prescribed play area. "Where boundaries

must exist, you must make them logical or de-emphasise them to give the sensation of openness," he explains. The swimming controls are now 3D, with Lara simply swimming at the pitch at which she's set rather than requiring the ascend/descend controls used in previous games.

Apart from weapons, Lara comes equipped with a digital camera. The pictures from which can be saved and shared with others through the Underworld website. Lindstrom demonstrates the system by throwing a sticky grenade at a shark and snapping the explosion. All weapons are operable in water, though the range of a handgun is just eight feet.

Lara's first task is to discover the entrance to the tomb on the barnacle- and weed-encrusted sea floor, but it's blocked by a door that needs to be opened by finding two axles hidden nearby and solving a simple rotation

puzzle. Navigation is aided by Lara's PDA, or implemented in the version we saw, which will send sonar pulses to draw a 3D map of the area, ping by ping, and reveal openings hidden by vegetation.

Once inside the cave, Lara must contend with a giant blind kraken that's blocking a door in a vast chamber. It's not interested in a scrap, but rather is a multi-tiered puzzle whose solution obviously involves a large spiked platform conveniently hanging above its head. "Most of the exploration-based puzzles in Underworld have multiple elements and do not have to be solved in a particular order," explains Lindstrom. Some puzzles have more than one solution, but this is more due to logic than because they were specifically designed that way. "If a weak link in a chain can be broken by shooting it, shouldn't a grenade also break it? It will," Lindstrom declares

Lara moves much more freely and smoothly than in previous games thanks to the introduction of motion-capture to the formerly key-framed franchise. She can also shoot a grapple into a wall and then clamber down a rope into a lower area

One of Underworld's best innovations is its take on QTEs or, rather, the way it has gone about removing them. In their place are adrenaline moments periods during which time slows to give players a chance to save Lara from a sudden death. "She gets a shot of adrenaline, her heartbeat races, time slows down the camera changes to give a good view of the situation and the player has full control of Lara to escape the situation," explains Lindstrom. In the kraken level, an adrenaline moment occurs when a wall comes crashing down, and shows how well it retains continuity with Lara's normal abilities, while better involving the player in the action.

Lara now has the ability to sprint, which can be put to use both under the water and on any surface. There are thousands of animations and transitions that are blended together seamlessly to make her actions fluid and lifelike
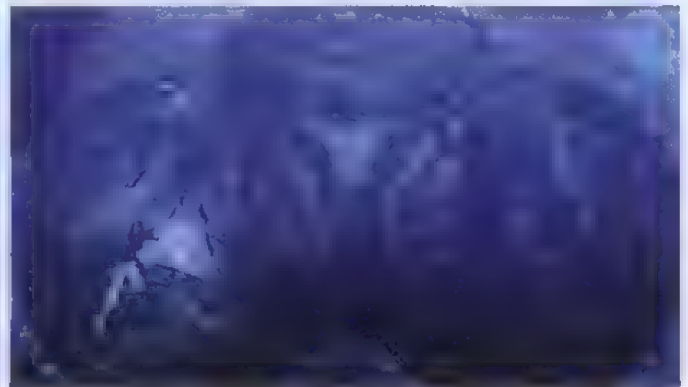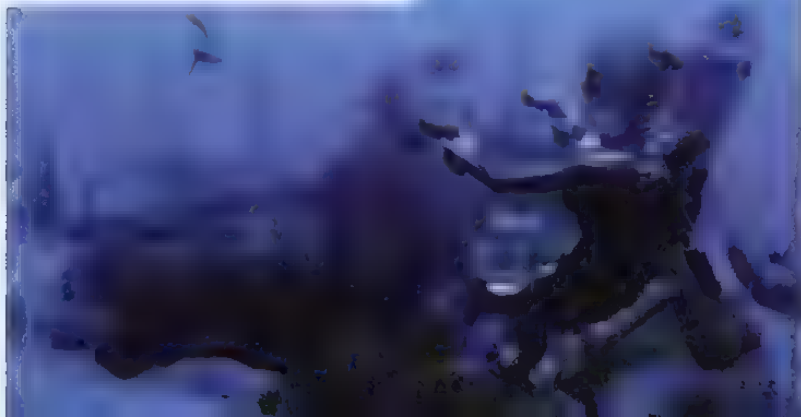
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Zero: Tsukihami No Kamen

Summertime, and the living dead are restless

The last three Zero games have made their home on PS2, but the heavy involvement of Nintendo this time suggests that the series may be swapping allegiances

It might be the season of bubblegum and blockbusters in the west, but in Japan the summer months bear witness to a cross-media deluge of horror. Fitting into this timetable of grisly delights is the fourth instalment in Tecmo's spooky Zero series, variously known as Project Zero and Fatal Frame in different regions of the world – and what better way to tap into Japan's mainstream horror audience than by releasing on Wii? This time development has been outsourced to Grasshopper Manufacture and its wunderkind CEO Suda 51, albeit in cooperation with the series' original director Shibata Makoto and closely supervised by Nintendo, under whose banner the game will eventually be sold.

Little specific information has been revealed about the scenario you'll face in this latest game, although it once again centres on exploration and exorcism of haunted environments while equipped with little more than a camera. Zero on Wii handles in much the same way as Resident Evil 4, using the Nunchuk to move and the Remote to direct the camera, giving an over-the-shoulder perspective. You're no Leon Kennedy, however, and as in previous Zero games your only form of defence against ghosts is to snap a picture of them, so sealing their soul into the celluloid. Firing off the shutter randomly will rebuff angry spectres only momentarily and it take a well-framed pic to vanquish the malevolent spirits. Not all ghostly encounters are hostile however, and the game promises as much puzzling as it does poltergeists, using the viewfinder to reveal things about the environment that are otherwise hidden.
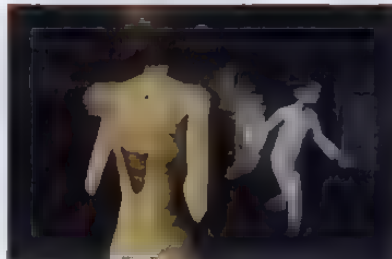
Among the questions that remain about the latest instalment is to what degree Grasshopper's involvement will force the series in a new direction. A little reinvention is necessary, particularly when taking the series to a new console – but with another Zero game being so anticipated, Tecmo must be keen to make sure it doesn't stray too far from its original appeal.
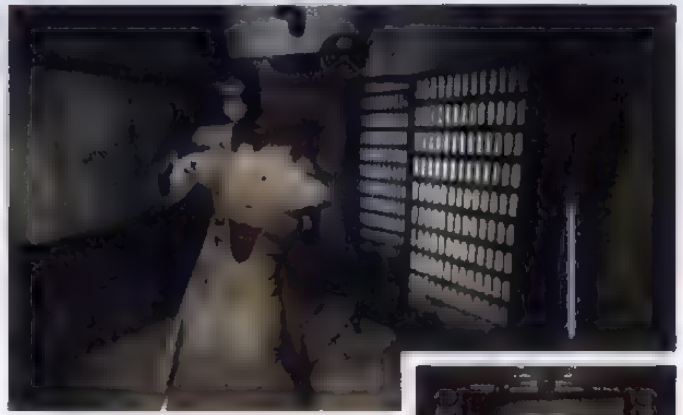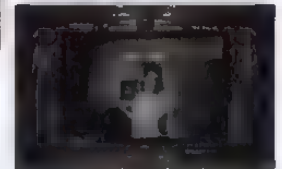
Details are scant about the fourth entry in the series (fifth if you count the mobile phone spin-off, Real Another Edition), but suggestions that it involves mysterious masks are confirmed by the subtitle, Mask Of The Lunar Eclipse.

Infinite Undiscovery

Microsoft offers an action-RPG-shaped carrot to the Japanese market

Tri-Ace has included multiple difficulty levels, presumably aware that trying to inject action into the traditionally stolid JRPG genre may put off fans used to a slower pace

Realising that big western 360 titles like Gears Of War 2 will do little to boost its flagging Japanese sales, Microsoft recently unveiled its new strategy to dominate the JRPG market. The 'Xbox 360 RPG Premiere 2008' event held in Tokyo's busy Shibuya district shone a light on four upcoming titles – Tales Of Vesperia, The Last Remnant, Star Ocean 4 and Infinite Undiscovery. While developers kept schtum on the possibility of PS3 versions, there was no talk of exclusivity either – instead these titles will simply see 'early release' on 360.

Alongside the big-name franchises sits Infinite Undiscovery, the product of close collaboration between tri-Ace and Square Enix. According to producer Hajime Kojima, the idea is to break the rigid formulas that so often regulate the JRPG, introducing action to elements that are traditionally presented in a much more straightforward and static manner. Journeys often abstracted to icons moving across a map, for example, will be replaced by action sequences in which characters evade desert storms and flee powerful beasts.

Kojima describes the core of this effort to be the Situation Battle. Combat is kept simple: a one button smash action which, despite taking place in realtime, depletes an action point gauge located on the right side of the screen. Although not made obvious by the demonstration, Kojima also claims that a key aspect of the game is the environment's level of interactivity: indeed, he says that the neologism undiscovery was coined to express the need for experimentation in unlocking the world's secrets.

While the effort that Microsoft has put into courting the Japanese market is readily apparent, the worldwide release and action focus of Infinite Undiscovery suggests that RPG developers themselves think that concentrating on a single market is too risky. How long will they risk being platform exclusive as well?
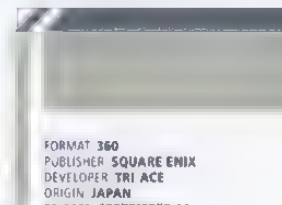
The entire game takes place in realtime, whether you are merely going through your inventory or trying to rest and regain some health
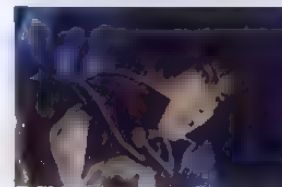
The hope is that securing a popular series for its console will reverse Xbox 360's fortunes in Japan, but Microsoft will have to find a definite answer on the period of these games' exclusivity if it is to lure customers away from the competition

The A-Life system models animal migrations and marks regions as natural habitats for certain species, but this doesn't mean they're the only places they'll be found

Stalker: Clear Sky

GSC returns to Chernobyl to make good on what it promised four years ago – but is it too late?

C lear Sky is another iteration on the way to what GSC Game World PR director **Oleg Yavorsky** calls its 'dream game', one set in an AI-driven and realism-focused freeform world. Its predecessor, Shadow Of Chernobyl, was a bag of progressive ideas that jostled against each other, leading to an uneasy tension between freedom and script. With 18 months of development time on top of the first game and the benefits of DirectX 10, Clear Sky is an outstanding second go.

Most immediate are the improvements to the graphics engine – Yavorsky takes us into the game's opening area, a ramshackle settlement. The models and textures are more detailed than in the original and it's shot through with God rays, and this with just a DX9 build of the game (it will also support DX8). A later demo of the DX10 effects that GSC will be applying to the game demonstrates volumetric smoke and steam that has physical properties, swirled into eddies by moving objects and flowing around them, and 'dynamically wetting surfaces' – environments that wet in rain with puddles forming, but that stay dry under cover. It all adds to Stalker's special air of authenticality, drap dated naturalism all the better to make The Zone appear real. "We want to stick to photorealistic environments to make it look authentic," Yavorsky says.

Chief among the more intrinsic improvements to the game, hoping to bolster the effects of players' actions in the
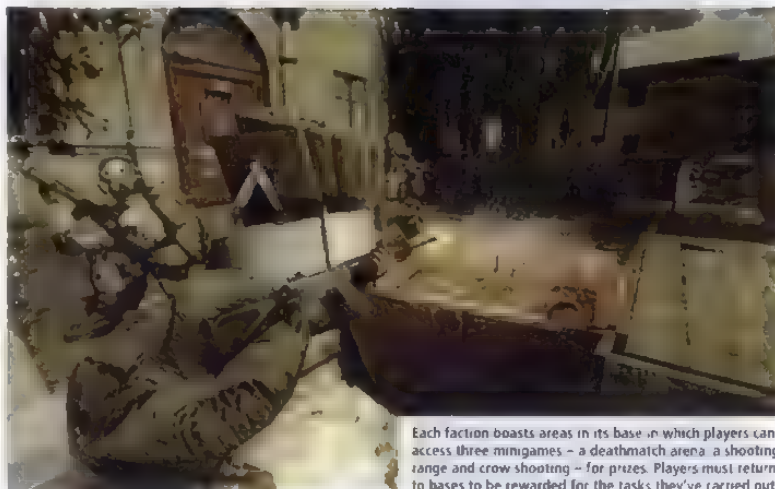
Each faction boasts areas in its base in which players can access three minigames – a deathmatch arena, a shooting range and crow shooting – for prizes. Players must return to bases to be rewarded for the tasks they've carried out

world is further development of the AI fe system that governs the actions of animals and NPCs in the world. Clear Sky has a new focus on the struggle for power between its four factions, each has its own base, storyline and unique characters, moving up in the ranks will result in more involving missions and helping your faction rise in stature will provide players with bigger, better equipped squads and a greater number of friendly outposts scattered over the world, many of which are won by players as they travel through it. An extremely capable squad will often accompany the player character on missions, able to take on outposts occupied

by enemy factions and wandering creatures with little management. Yavorsky begins an expedition into Marsh, one of the six new areas, for a total of 12), and his squadmates immediately take crouched stances. Finding an outpost, Yavorsky pauses to explain their capabilities – how they can autonomously accomplish missions and tasks – and while he's talking they happily mop up all resistance by themselves. While there's a danger of such autonomy taking away some of the player's pivotal agency in the world, it gives the sense that it's living around you.

But while GSC has worked hard to make Clear Sky's play flow more naturally in a naturalistic world, it contains various anachronisms that other open-world games have long since dropped. The Zone is still not a seamless, streamed world. "We'll have to stick with loading locations – the problem is that you need to choose between going for high detailing and being seamless," claims Yavorsky. "We have these complex geometries and details, so if we went for seamless environments we would have to sacrifice that." It's still interface-heavy, with a HUD including mini-map, stance indicator, ammo gauge and so on all clustered at the edges of the screen, and missions are doled out in text boxes with dialogue choices.

Such throwbacks can't help but remind us that Far Cry 2 is following closely on Clear Sky's heels, a game with many of the same goals as Stalker's but with a better integrated interface, leading to a concern that perhaps it's already too late to build the game that Stalker should have been.

Just as in the first Stalker, anomalies – localised areas of disruption caused in part by the Chernobyl meltdown – are scattered throughout The Zone. GSC has added a few different types to Clear Sky, including one that teleports and another causing a vortex of water in one of Marsh's many lakes. Some conceal valuable artefacts that must be located by throwing bolts into the anomaly, which allows its position to be tracked with a detector. Artefacts can again be sold for money and, responding to criticism of the first game in which there was little that was worth spending the cash on, GSC has introduced weapon upgrades. Each one has 16 upgrades divided into development trees, allowing them to be specialised according to player preference.

You can choose to buy alliances with other factions, though this will obviously ruin your relationships with previous allies. With each having its own unique characters and mission sets, it allows exploration of the motivations and cultures of the other denizens of The Zone

Skate It

Black Box reinterprets its intuitive Flick It system for motion control

The uncanny valley isn't a phenomenon restricted to depicting organic things – as you bring a control scheme for any virtual instrument or tool close enough to the real thing, the points at which its control diverges become all the more startling. The use of the Balance Board to control a skateboard could be one such example.

Right now, *Skate It* on Wii permits a variety of inputs: the Remote by itself, or in conjunction with either the Nunchuk or Balance Board. However, developer Black Box has suggested that it would love to put all the control on the Balance Board itself. While it simulates much of a skateboard's control, jumping on and flipping a Balance Board is obviously out of the question – meaning that you would have to use the peripheral in some non-intuitive way, possibly ending up with a jarring mixture of abstract and directly representational control schemes issuing from the one peripheral.

Developers on hand to demo the game at a recent EA event obviously recognise this risk, and were keen to stress that the notion of putting control entirely on the Balance Board could easily remain just that: a notion. If anything, the current control schemes are several degrees more accessible than the game's 360 incarnation. Holding the Remote horizontally, you tip left or right to adjust your direction, lifting it up and rotating it in various ways to perform jumps and tricks. It's almost too easy, making the challenge of the game simply one of positioning and timing.

Already a benchmark for accessible control, the *Skate* series looks set to go one step better with its Wii outing – so long as a board-shaped peripheral doesn't trick the developer into thinking it should make a simulator rather than a videogame.

The DS version uses the lower screen to make flicking movements along a skateboard that are the 2D representation of an analogue stick's motion. Black Box has also squeezed a good deal of visual detail from the handheld

Skate It moves away from the fictional city of San Valona, which has been left a ghost town after a series of ludicrous natural disasters, and instead takes players on a world tour of skating hotspots

Facebreaker

EA goes toe-to-toe with the shiny rubber daps of the Punch Out and Ready 2 Rumble series

It's taken eight years for a new challenger to step up. *Wii Sports* offered a stop-gap of sorts, but it's EA that will finally revive the genre with a wantonly knockabout cartoon boxing game that hopes to appeal to teenage boys with a roster of excessive caricatures and a large quantity of gratuitous skull-pummelling.

On hand at a recent EA event in London, producer Todd Batty said that the game's characters were designed with two particular criteria in mind: first, they were to appear to be feasible as action figures, and second, they were to avoid all the usual racial stereotypes common to fighting games. With a Russian character named Molotov and witchdoctor called Voodoo it seems like they weren't terribly successful on achieving this second part but, nonetheless, the drawing of the game's characters and their expressive animation is of a standard that tempts clichéd comparisons with Pixar.

Underneath the presentational polish, Batty promises a fighter that is both instantly accessible and deep. Certainly, it seems like players are encouraged to be continually on the offensive, building up a meter with consecutive unbroken punches to unlock each character's more devastating moves. Whatever the actual game is like, however, EA has almost certainly hit on a winning strategy by allowing you to upload your own face to a boxer, *Rainbow Six Vegas*-style, and then modify it as you would in other EA Sports character creation tools.

Batty demonstrated this by putting Peter Moore's head on the body of a monkey, and then contorting it to resemble ET. The developer's hope is not just that players will put themselves into the game but create and share a huge catalogue of user-made contestants based on celebrities, movie icons, game characters and so on. It's a system that's probably open to abuse, and EA surely knows it – in fact, that may just be the game's biggest selling point.

The game is being created by the same team that made *Fight Night Round 3*, but don't expect it to take itself anywhere near as seriously as the previous title

Repeated successful hits build up your Breaker Meter – for each segment of the bar that is filled an incrementally more powerful attack is unlocked

While it may look cartoony, *Facebreaker* is startlingly vicious at times. Ice's finishing move sees him hammer his opponent's head repeatedly into the canvas before performing a few one handed push ups on their broken face

Dead Space

Can EA's horror-survival shooter create atmosphere in a vacuum?

Playing as hapless engineer Isaac Clarke (presumably the name Arthur Asimov was just a little too brazenly referential), you find yourself in dire straits when a repair and recovery mission turns into the plot of Event Horizon

H orror is a lot like comedy – you can tell a joke once, maybe twice at most, but then it starts getting stale." We've asked **Derek Chan**, associate producer on EA's Dead Space, if there's a chance that players might become fatigued by the relentlessly oppressive setting of the dilapidated deep-space mining vessel, the Ishimura. Apparently not.

"Dead Space is full of one-offs," says Chan. "We have a certain sound here, or a necromorph popping up a certain way – it's the dev team's job to break the pattern as much as we can. And to get to a 15- to 20-hour horror experience, you need to be doing that a lot. So what you've seen so far is not all of it. We've got corridors, sure, but we've got vast spaces as well. We've got game mechanics we haven't shown yet."

Although the section we played featured a fairly consistent drip-feed of combat against necromorphs – the gruesomely corrupted crew members that now stalk Ishimura's hallways – Chan promises that huge sections of the game will rely on

Dead Space has a promotional campaign behind it that includes a series of comics and an animated feature (due for simultaneous release with the game) which flesh out the events that bring the Ishimura to the state in which players discover it. We are promised cults and alien artefacts – rarely a happy combination – and we suspect that there may even be a little bit of Peter F Hamilton's The Reality Dysfunction thrown in for good measure.

It's almost worth dying in Dead Space just to witness the death animations, with poor Isaac frequently finding himself impaled and gutted before decapitation and dismemberment
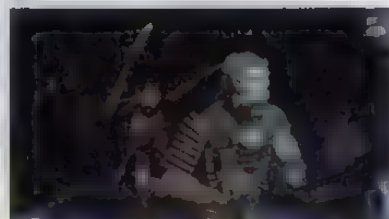
puzzling your way through derelict environments. Equipped with telekinesis and the ability to slow time in localised areas, there is potential here for a combination of the two to create stimulating challenges. The examples from our playthrough were a little underwhelming in their simplicity, however – a malfunctioning door needed to be slowed so the player could slip through, an elevator needed a battery inserted in order to power it up.

With sparse ammunition, however, both these abilities come in useful in combat. As in Resident Evil 4 (the game that also inspires Dead Space's over-the-shoulder viewpoint), battles are more a matter of crowd control

Movement through the Ishimura's medical bay tells a story that recalls the colonial marines' arrival on LV-426 in Aliens: signs saying 'We Are Full' plaster the walls, but broken barricades prove the attempts to secure the facility were unsuccessful

than carnage. The stasis power is useful for constructing the flow of enemies, and telekinesis can be used to turn the Ishimura's decaying clutter into weaponry. Rather than kill enemies outright, your guns are better used to blow off limbs in order to hamper each necromorph's particular attack style.

Potentially interesting in mechanical terms, the necromorphs' design has a problem in that they aren't immediately scary, despite an abundance of fangs, viscera and talons. Dead Space is keen to echo horror tropes – The Thing and Event Horizon being the two most obvious touchstones – but the aesthetic of both these films, though unpleasant, was not what made them unnerving. The Thing was fraught with paranoia over who remained human. Event Horizon warped the perception of reality. Though not evident during our play session, Chan says that the player will encounter other humans who add a more psychological dimension to the horror. "It would be a pretty boring game if it was just you. Claustrophobia sets in. You get used to the horror, right?"

Dead Space is making big claims for its frights, and with some substance behind the game and gore. That its sights are set higher than delivering a succession of gross-out shocks only bodes well

Tom Clancy's HAWX

Ubisoft goes up against Ace Combat – but is
its ego writing cheques its franchise can't cash?

From the team that bought us *Blazing Angels* comes an aircraft shooter that hopes to blow the *Ace Combat* series from the skies with a volley of Tom Clancy-branded 20mm cannon fire. We had a chance to climb into the cockpit at Ubidays and take to the air in the defence of Rio de Janeiro. Apparently, other missions will see you engage in battles that you may have previously witnessed from the ground in fellow Clancy game *GRAW2*

The city of Rio looks stunning from above, certainly – but, as with all such flying games, textures at ground level inspire considerably less awe than when zipping around at high altitude. The big area in which it differs from competing air combat games is in its use of assisted guidance and what it calls Enhanced Reality Systems. When in assisted mode, the view is from the cockpit or over the tail, marking out enemies in the manner of *GRAW*, limiting manoeuvrability to prevent stalls and even plotting intercept courses to particular targets via a series of hoops superimposed on the HUD.

Move out of assisted mode, however, and the view pulls back to a great distance, no longer centring on or turning wholly with your now-tiny aircraft's movement. Your manoeuvrability increases, allowing you to pull off sharp turns to evade incoming missiles, or yank yourself from a nose dive into a mountainside. With the view fixed in this near-static manner, it almost feels like a 2D shooter, but that reduced sense of depth is of little hindrance given the heightened perception of incoming dangers. Our brief time with the game suggests that it is advantageous to constantly switch from

assisted to unassisted, certainly, bouncing between these two modes introduces a welcome tinge of the arcade to a genre that is sometimes at risk of feeling a little sterile. With a few tweaks (particularly to the currently insufficient radar) and the promise of a large number of real-world locations to scream above, we may well let *HAWX* be our wingman.

The demo allowed us to buzz under the armpit of Rio's Christ the Redeemer and later levels promise plenty of other real-world landmarks to zip past at Mach three
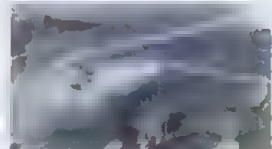
Planes are noisy beasts, but *HAWX* drowns out the din with a cacophony of high-pitched warnings as missiles home in. Useful though they are, we hope there's an option to turn them off

Tom Clancy's EndWar

It's the end of the world as we know
it, and we feel fine – but not great

Last year we visited Shanghai to see and play an almost functionally complete *EndWar*. That the intervening time has been spent balancing and tweaking the console RTS suggests just how important this game is in establishing the Shanghai studio's name, and also the game's position as fulcrum of the Tom Clancy franchise – bringing together the fictions set out in *Ghost Recon*, *Rainbow Six*, *HAWX* and presumably also *Splinter Cell* in one apocalyptic conflagration

Much time and effort has been spent fine-tuning the voice command system that underpins the game's console credentials. Last year, *EndWar* very occasionally had difficulties interpreting our slack-jawed mumbling – now such issues have been all but eradicated. Words like 'reinforce' have been removed from *EndWar*'s lexicon to be replaced by shorter ones that have higher recognition rates, like 'deploy' Other commands have been intuitively combined. infantry units will automatically climb into

Seeing the game at the Ubidays event in Paris we witnessed firsthand *EndWar*'s ability to deal with a wide variety of accents – even the heavy Hispanic inflection of one delegate proved inconsequential to the voice control

APCs when the order is given for both of them to move to the same objective

But even if the voice command system is astonishingly adept, then in other respects *EndWar* has yet to really grab us. Visually, the game has improved since our last viewing, but it is not pretty by any stretch – the images released so far to the press, including those on this page, are not representative of the experience at large. It's not helped by the perspective, which locks your vision behind a selected unit, and brings textures and the slightly poly-shy environments a little too close for comfort. This has been adjusted since our last hands-on to give you a little more freedom, but still feels frustratingly restrictive in comparison to the god-like view of other RTS games. The separate top-down tactical map lacks the information density to make it a truly effective means of control – unit types aren't immediately identified as anything more than a numbered hostile. The speed of control leant by voice command is certainly *EndWar*'s winning feature – we hope further play will prove that it is not the only thing that recommends it
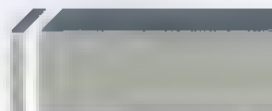
The camera is much improved, giving you more freedom to peek around corners

FFYB R.I.P.

THE MAN BEHIND GEARS OF WAR MAY BE TIRED OF SOUNDING LIKE SOMETHING OUT OF A BOY BAND, BUT HOW IS HIS THIRST FOR GUNS AND GORE?

What statement did you want to make to the industry with *Gears Of War*?
Thirdperson shooters can be fun. It's OK to see your character. Cover is something that can be fun. And game stories can be simple and enjoyable and don't need to always be filled with four-hour cutscenes.

Do you think *Gears 2* will make the same sort of waves?
I think where *Gears 2* is going to have an effect on the business is how people build their games as far as games being bigger blockbusters and having little palette-cleansing moments where the gameplay changes a little bit. We're taking the whole idea of a playable summer blockbuster to the next level. I think people are going to be exhausted when they finish this game. It's going to be that much of a crazy ride for them.

The first game's cover system and co-op play proved to be quite influential – was that a surprise?
I thought *Gears* wasn't innovative? [He's referring to the 8/10 review in E170, but smiling.] It's a huge surprise, man, but at the same time it's kind of the assumption that we were making a shooter and it's always weird to have guys with guns running right at each other. Right? It seems like if people were getting shot at, they'd find cover, wait for the fire to break, and then return covering fire, etc, etc. I'm flattered. The team's flattered. But I still think we're putting a lot of tweaks into *Gears 2* to make the covering system even better, so it's going to consistently perform like people expect it to. It's going to perform crisp and responsive and intuitive.

How difficult was it to strip things out of *Gears 1* in order to ship it on time?
George Broussard from 3D Realms likes to say that cutting features ships games, but at the same time you have to know when enough is enough with a game. I would love to get every

last creature and every last weapon that was initially concepted into the game but the reality of it all is that you're making the best game you can with X people and Y months and Z dollars, and you gotta find the best way to do that. Unfortunately, that's the reality of development. The plus side of it is that the player gets to see a heck of a lot more of the Brumack in *Gears 2*, and kill a lot more of them.

When you discard assets because you run out of time, what do you do with them? Is it easy to just roll them into the next game?
Not necessarily. The Brumack that's in *Gears 2* is severely up-rezzed – his detail is increased exponentially over the first one. But since we had the basic idea of what the functionality of the creature is, the boss monster in the first game becomes more of a frequent enemy in a sequel. That's kind of the standard cycle for a shooter, right? Where boss characters become more frequently featured later in the series

The first *Gears* game hinted at narrative which it didn't have the time to deliver. The sequel should tie up the loose ends – the identity of Marcus Fenix's father and why he was mapping subterranean tunnels will hopefully become clearer

> "PEOPLE ARE GOING TO BE EXHAUSTED WHEN THEY FINISH THIS GAME. IT'S GOING TO BE THAT MUCH OF A CRAZY RIDE"

Did you know going into *Gears 1* that you'd have the PC version to turn the Brumack into a playable boss battle?
We weren't completely sure. But we do like the PC and we do want to support it, so we knew we had to introduce added content, so not only did we put in the boss battle, we had this whole level scenario that was like a 15-minute sequence that was cut from the original game that turned into a two-hour experience through an electrical plant and getting a bridge lowered, etc, etc. A lot of players online cited it as one of their favourite levels.

Do you prefer working on games that are technically innovative?
I think innovation is a tricky thing. You can innovative with a game massively, if you're doing like a *Shadow Of The Colossus*-type game,

Gears 2 is unashamed of its appeal to machismo absurdity, and it is somehow charming; we can't help but feel suitably titillated by the prospect of chainsaw duels concluded with yet-more-gruesome dismemberment animation.

more story-integrated co-op where player two is a character and he's not just a clone of the first character. A lot more games are doing that, like *Army Of Two*. I hate seeing a character run towards me in a thirdperson shooter. I've always hated that. Marcus backs up. If a guy has a gun and he runs towards me and I go to shoot, then he has to turn around or he's shooting at me. I've never been a fan of that.

How important are choreographed sequences in *Gears 2*, as opposed to gameplay that is wholly emergent?
Gears is essentially an hourglass model, where the player comes into open arenas like in *Gears 1* where we had the East Barricade Courtyard fight, where the player spawns and he can pick up the sniper rifle or lancer and go around any number of ways to take out the enemies in that area. Once the objective is cleared and the path

or you can take an existing formula and innovate in that formula. You look at *Gears 1* and, yes, it's a shooter, yes, you're dealing with monsters and there are tough guys, but the cover system, the roadie-run, the story-integrated co-op – these are all things other developers really seem to be inspired by and they're really digging. And I think the gamers responded well to it, hence the reviews and the sales. I like to innovate. For everything innovative in a game it's OK to have a polished version of what's been there before.

Do you think that design and technology always go hand in hand?
They do. For instance, the programming team came up with the fractionable technology and then we had to figure out ways to leverage it:

more in the levels. You look at the crowd system that came online with the engine and then we went back and looked to see where we could feature these awesome crowds: 'How can we use it more?' You have to have an idea of what you're doing but you have to be liquid enough to adjust and compensate based on what comes online from the tech team.

You've taken QTEs out of *Gears 2* – what other design tropes would you like to see stripped out of games?
Cutscenes should be skippable. They should never be longer than a certain length. Past five or ten minutes, it becomes: 'Oh, really?'

Even with, say, the *Final Fantasy* games?
I don't want to name names, man. I'd like to see
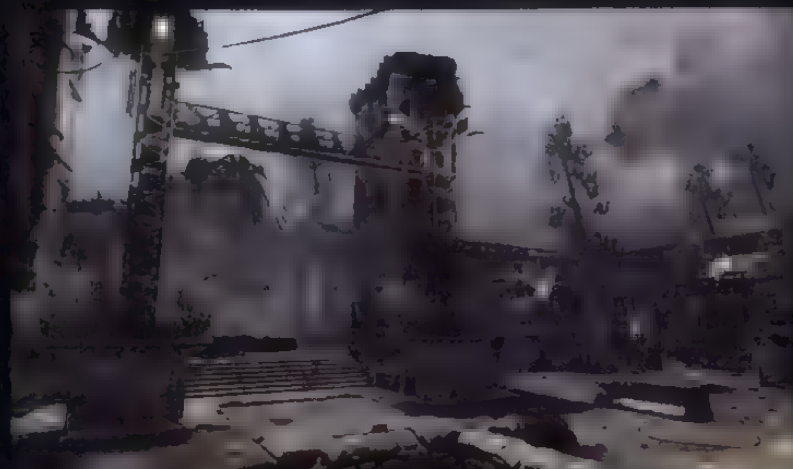
...on what the objective at hand is when there's so many things going on around him – for instance, when the truck gets hi-jacked, making it very clear to the player that he has to shoot out the driver. We try and keep the objects in front of the player's face that he would have to deal with as far as the truck coming up right next to him, the sparks drawing his eye. [There's the] point-of-interest button so you can hit that and see what's going on. And then supporting dialogue that says: 'Here's what you do', and you have to repeat it over and over again. That's the biggest challenge with all of this.

There appears to be greater emphasis on backstory and narrative this time: why is story so important to a game that is all about men killing monsters with big guns?
Because context is important. Context was important with *Doom*. When I played *Doom* I thought I was cool because I felt like I was an American marine going against the forces of Hell. If I was just Frank from Detroit versus alien greys, it wouldn't have been as compelling. There was something righteous about what I was doing, feeling like I was on the side of good. Narrative and context and story are incredibly important for games. If you hear the Chairman's opening speech in the game, he reminds everybody what's at stake – that humanity is at stake. That's the future of where

is opened again, then he gets funneled to a new location. Maybe there's a co-op split. We do have more open areas in *Gears 2*, but by and large, we're not a *GTA* sandbox open-world game. We're open-world in how the combat plays out with various weapons and the enemies that you have to deal with.

What are the gameplay effects of the new emphasis on scale?
The trickiest thing is keeping the player focused

"CONTEXT IS IMPORTANT. IF, IN DOOM, I WAS JUST FRANK FROM DETROIT, IT WOULDN'T HAVE BEEN AS COMPELLING"

gaming's going, in terms of context. We're still summer blockbuster, but even in Transformers: The Movie you cared whether or not Shia LaBeouf got the girl. There's still a lot of that that I think you can play with in the game.

Where does the team get its inspiration for the technologies featured in the game, such as the Grindlift Derricks?
Oh God, we just want to see large, heavy interesting machinery and stuff like that. Plain and simple – we needed a cool, simple way to
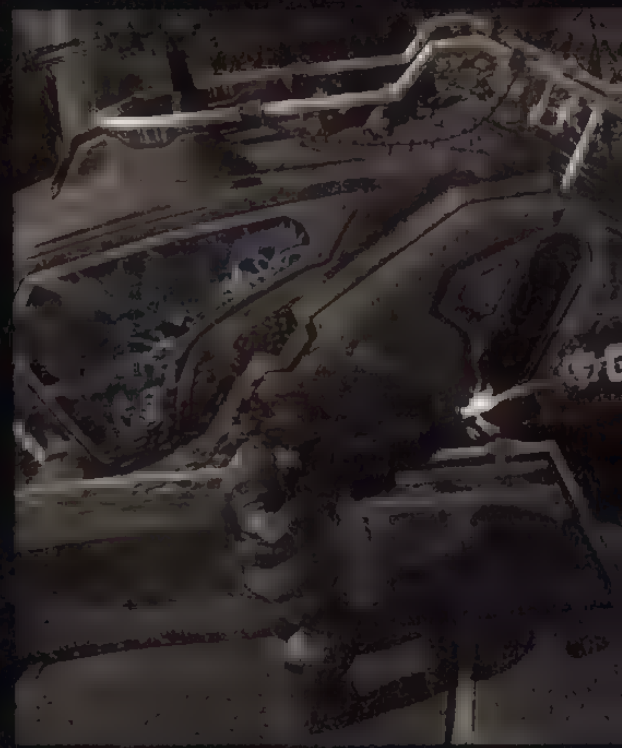
get COG soldiers underground. That's where that pseudo-science came from.

Did Dizzy's redneck influences come from being here in North Carolina for ten years?
Yeah, the southern influence, right? I think Dizzy is going to polarise gamers. Some of them are going to love him, some of them are going to hate him. But you know what? They're all going to remember him and they're all going to talk about him as opposed to McGenericson, a guy who nobody remembers. I'd rather have a character that some people love and some people frickin' hate – at least they remember him. That's a risk I'll take. He's great to see in multiplayer with the big cowboy hat on.

Is this game gorier than the previous one?
It's a little bit gorier than the first one. There's a little bit more detail as far as blood on the walls, and there's some new chainsaw moves, but as much as we get a kick out of the blood, I'm more excited about the relationship between the squad, to be honest. I like to see the new lines that Cole gets to deliver and the interplay between Marcus and Dom. And Dom's search for his wife. Even Jack, the little robot, has more animations this time around. He's a little bit cuter. I hope the gore doesn't overshadow this type of stuff.

How do you decide on where to set the limits on gore?
The kind of violence we have is still very Evil Dead. It's not torture porn that we do. It's more Blue Man Group pounding the paint and Gallagher smashing the watermelon violence than it is to hold somebody down and water-

The promises that Gears 2 would be bigger than ever before certainly seem to be confirmed by the footage released so far, featuring vast armies. But is bigger always better? Gears was often at its finest in taut tactical battles
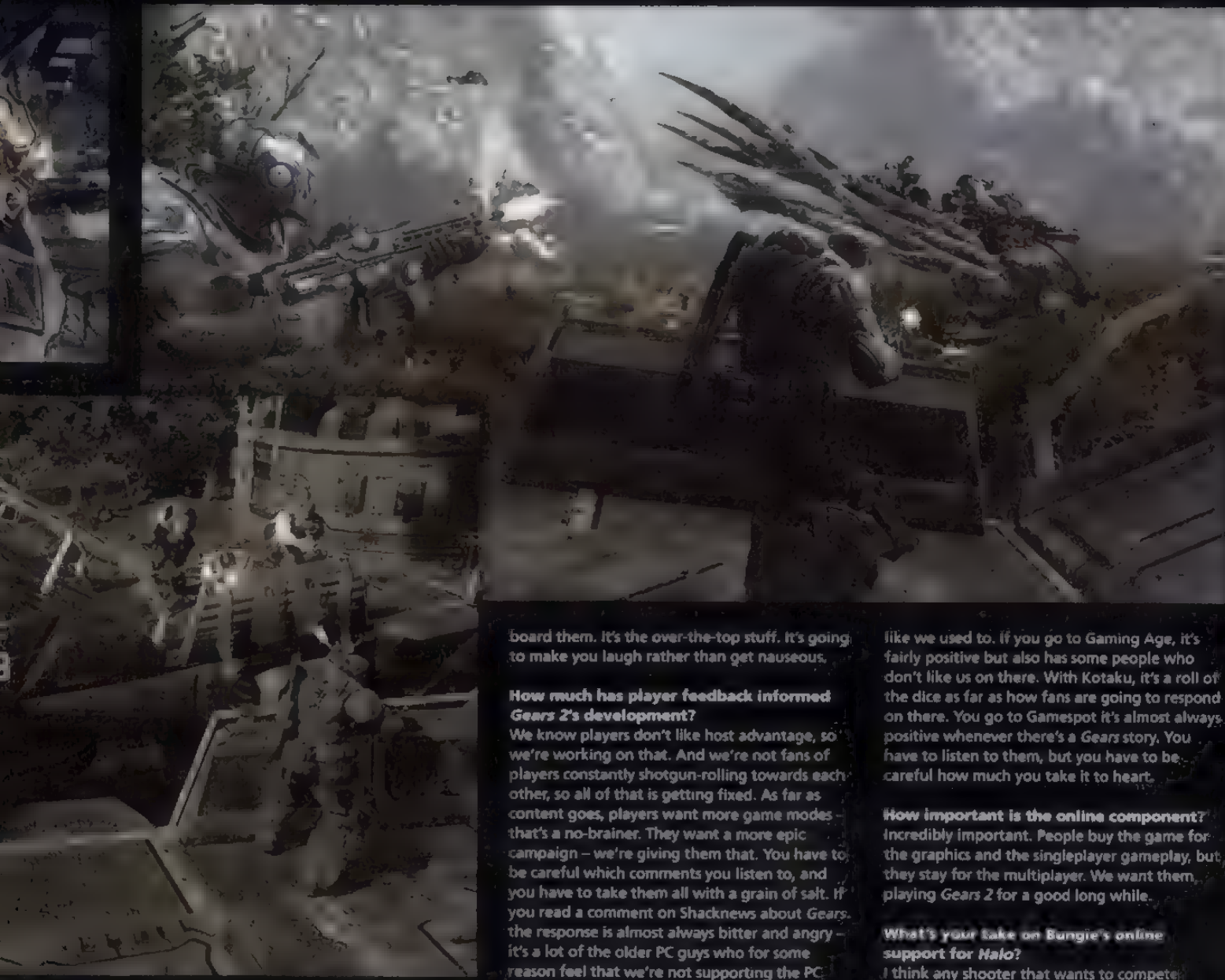
board them. It's the over-the-top stuff. It's going to make you laugh rather than get nauseous.

How much has player feedback informed Gears 2's development?
We know players don't like host advantage, so we're working on that. And we're not fans of players constantly shotgun-rolling towards each other, so all of that is getting fixed. As far as content goes, players want more game modes – that's a no-brainer. They want a more epic campaign – we're giving them that. You have to be careful which comments you listen to, and you have to take them all with a grain of salt. If you read a comment on Shacknews about Gears, the response is almost always bitter and angry – it's a lot of the older PC guys who for some reason feel that we're not supporting the PC

like we used to. If you go to Gaming Age, it's fairly positive but also has some people who don't like us on there. With Kotaku, it's a roll of the dice as far as how fans are going to respond on there. You go to Gamespot it's almost always positive whenever there's a Gears story. You have to listen to them, but you have to be careful how much you take it to heart.

How important is the online component?
Incredibly important. People buy the game for the graphics and the singleplayer gameplay, but they stay for the multiplayer. We want them playing Gears 2 for a good long while.

What's your take on Bungie's online support for Halo?
I think any shooter that wants to compete

in this day and age needs to not only be a great game but also needs to be its own platform so players can consume themselves in the forums and upload screenshots and stuff like that. If you don't have stuff like drop-in/drop-out co-op, expanded multiplayer features, etc, you're dead in the water. I think Bungie's done a great job of it.

How do the improvements to Unreal Engine 3 feed into the Gears 2 experience?
It's a big design decision with the whole

environment being able to chip away because we didn't want players to completely destroy all of the cover in a level. You can destroy desks and dressers and things like that, but you can chip away at cover that guys are behind to get a bit of an angle on them. If you plant a grenade in the wall it explodes and chunks go flying everywhere and it's really, really cool. We'll try to make sure explosive propane tanks are placed near a mesh that blows up nicely. These are the types of things where the creatives need to take the technology and show

"I'M KIND OF OVER MY DAYS OF MAKING BUNNY GAMES, YOU KNOW? WE'RE NOT ITTY BITTY GAMES – WE'RE EPIC GAMES"

off the technology, because if you don't, there's no point in doing it. With the new multiplayer river map that we have, I was talking to the artist and it used to be just a plane of water; once we got the new animated water that moves as you go through it, we actually added that to the game and you can see the water moving underneath your feet as you walk through it. You have to keep on pushing and make sure this stuff is leveraged.

You mentioned PCs earlier – how do you regard their place in the videogame industry at the moment?
It's funny, I was quoted as saying the PC is in a state of disarray and that got skewed into 'The PC's dying...' The PC is just evolving in its own different directions. Any time you have a device that's built for work, people will always

want to goof off on it and have fun. I think you'll still see plenty of new PC games. They just announced a new Crysis game [Warhead] the other day. Our engine will continue to shine on PC. World Of WarCraft and The Sims continue to be PC juggernauts. You'll see it evolve in other unique ways like Facebook gaming and web-based games and mods and things like that. It's not going to go away any time soon.

Could your work on Gears, creating focused shooters with strong multiplayer on a console, be helping to undermine the PC's position?
I wouldn't necessarily say that. We're partnered with Microsoft because they help us make a better game and they market the hell out of it. It's just as much about the partner to make

While trailers have shown swarms of enemies, it's not clear that the player will face these increased numbers in combat or whether they will largely remain in the background, preserving the dynamics of the original game.

360 has millions
once you ship a
every console
dollars are r
make a great
marketing s

How is Epic positioned to take advantage PC gaming is going through now?
We're working on it. We recently joined the PC Alliance. We have our heritage and a soft spot for the PC. We definitely want to make sure people are still gaming on it. Lord knows people are YouTubing, Facebooking and IMing all day long, and as businessmen we'd love to have their money buying our games and playing them.

Do you think Epic is doing a good job of balancing its 3D engine business with its own game development?
I believe we are. We provide a tremendous support network for our partners and it's resulted in really cool games like *Army Of Two*, the new *Bourne* game, *Mirror's Edge*, etc, etc. But we're also cranking out new games that are ranked great and sell great and we're going to continue to do that.

Do you ever miss the days when Epic worked on a wider range of games?
I'm kind of over my days of making bun
games, you know? We like our games in 3D with big, epic, cinematic things going on. We're not called Itty Bitty Games – we're Epic Games, man. We've got to stay big, go big or go home. That's what we're doing now.

A LEAGUE OF THEIR OWN

WITH SOME COSTLY MISTAKES TO LEARN FROM, THE TEAM THAT STALLED ON STAR WARS GALAXIES IS NOW EYEING UP AN ENTIRE UNIVERSE
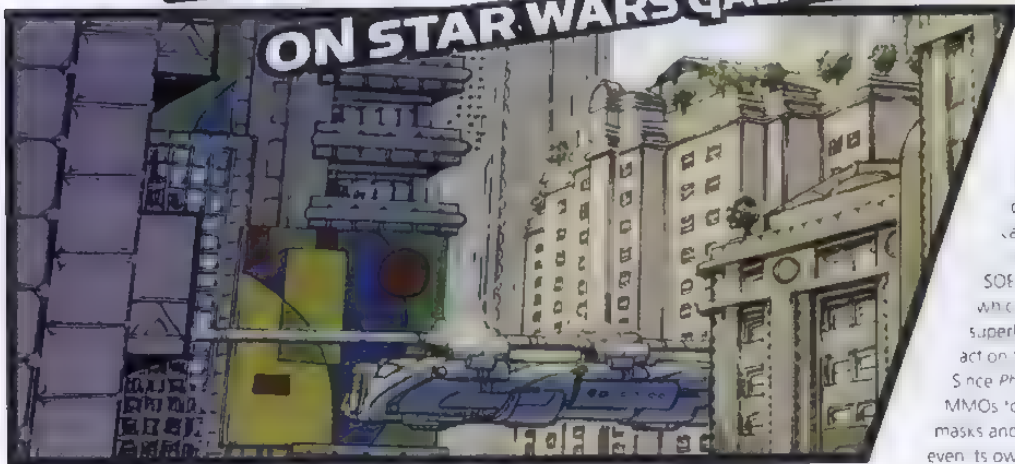
A ustin, Texas is where worlds collide, where tech millionaires meet dairy farmers, and where the parallel dimensions offered by a half-dozen MMOs compete for server space. With so many alternate realities overlapping, you have to expect a little blending around the edges; that's why we aren't surprised when our arrival at Sony Online Entertainment's Austin studio sees us greeted at the door by both Superman and Darth Vader, albeit in cardboard cut-out form.

We're here for Superman. For the past two years SOE Austin has been quietly at work on a new MMO, which will take a Byzantine world of comic books and superheroes and turn it into DC Universe Online, an action title for the PC — and, more problematically, PS3. Since Phantasy Star Online, no one's managed to get MMOs to truly click on consoles; Austin is hoping that masks and capes will succeed where Final Fantasy and even its own EverQuest have previously failed.
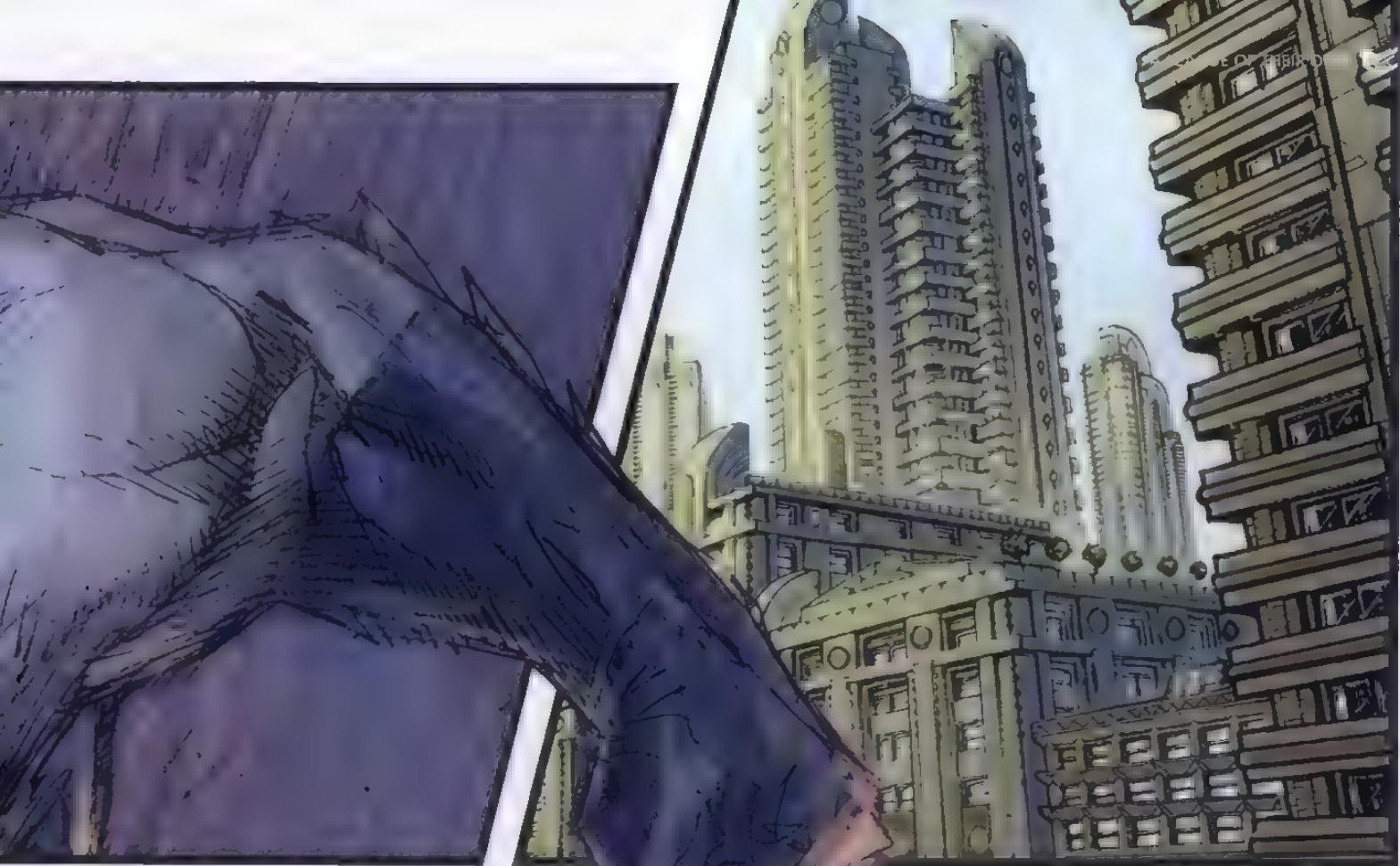
DC UNIVERSE ONLINE
PC
SONY ONLINE ENTERTAINMENT
IN HOUSE (SOE AUSTIN)
US
2009

There's a lot about the DC universe that makes it an excellent licence for MMOs. 70 years deep and nearly 4,000 characters wide (according to the Austin team, who have presumably done a headcount), it's up there with Coca-Cola and penicillin in terms of worldwide recognition. But there are also things that make it difficult. Take character balancing, an issue that has kept schoo playgrounds abuzz since the '30s in discussions over whether Batman would beat Superman in a fight (he would): there's a design cha lenge of potentially game-breaking proportions. And that's before you've even got to the deeper matter of taking the one thing that defines superheroes – they aren't like everyone e se – and putting them in a world where they are like everyone else. Suddenly the safe bet sn't ooking quite so safe

And there's something more. Austin has had great licences before, and fumbled them – both in development, with *Star Wars Galaxies*, a title that fundamentally misinterpreted what players would want from a Star Wars game, and in administration, with the underwhelming – and disconcertingly green *Matrix Online*. inherited from Ubisoft

Galaxies was a real learning experience for the studio, and while Austin remains deeply proud of how it handled the game long term (subscriptions are stable, and the community is largely happy), you can't help but suspect it's the pride a parent might feel for a son who's finally kicked his methadone habit. There's no shying away from the fact that the game should have been huge and wasn't Regardless, Austin is determined to learn from its mistakes "One of the things we have learnt wholeheartedly is that you have to pay off on the licence," admits vice president of development **John Blakely** "With *Galaxies*, we had a vision of a product, and we stuck that into the licence. We

CAPE FEAR

If Austin's art director, Michael Daubert, is frustrated about having Jim Lee drawing all the concept art for his game, he isn't showing it, and that's probably because he has a challenge of his own: taking cartoon panels and making them work in three dimensions. "There has to be a collaboration between the 2D and 3D sides," explains Daubert. "In comics, there's a lot of cheating going on, and that's what makes it dynamic. You don't want a boring image, you want something that's over the top. Here's an example: Jim treats Batman as two characters – Batman and Batman's cape It's part of the fear factor of the character. How do you pull that into 3D? In the movies. that never feels right, so what we do is cheat a lot. Our capes are physics-based, but we also have a lot of animation control over them so we can make them billow dramatically when we need to."

attract Star Wars fans, they show up, and then it's not the game they think it is. It's crafting and queuing up actions."

It's not an error the team want to make twice. "So when we first got DC, we started with what it means to make a DC MMO," says Blakely. "You need to feel what it is to be a superhero: if it doesn't have that, then it doesn't matter what you have."

Some might argue that NCSoft's City Of Heroes has already staked this territory, but Blakely disagrees. "Heroes imitates the World Of Warcraft framework. What we wanted to do is not imitate an MMO but make a great superhero game, and to do that we needed the console, because when we looked at people's favourite superhero games, they generally seemed to be console games, too. They're just more immediate that way."

But there's that problem again: Blakely then admits that he can't think of any genuinely successful console MMOs, even including EverQuest Online Adventures, the one he helped make. "In the past, developers have taken PC games and just ported them. But console players want it fast and furious. This has to work for a console from the start." "We knew for a PS3 game, EverQuest with capes wouldn't work," agrees superhero-sized

The Batcave will appear in DCUO in the form of a raid area. The game's full physics model means you'll be able to smack the Dark Knight over the head with his own car, too. Austin plans to grow the gameworld to encompass most of the messy excesses of the DC universe, which will eventually mean leaving Earth behind

twitch skills. "It's an action game minute-to-minute, an MMO month-to-month," clarifies Cao. "Over the months, we have levels for the MMO guys, and then instantaneous action for the action guys. Neither of those are contradictory. It's chocolate and peanut butter: it will go well together." Blakely agrees: "You can log in for 20 minutes, start a fight, win an item, and then log off. Fun moment to moment in a superhero context isn't all about whacking rats. It's drama."

This framework is there to let the licence shine – but not necessarily as expected. In short, you

"WHAT IF YOU WANT TO PICK A FIGHT WITH SUPERMAN? YOU DON'T HAVE TO WAIT FOR THE QUEST: YOU TRASH DOWNTOWN METROPOLIS"

creative director **Chris Cao**, a six-foot-seven cross between Orson Welles and Brian Blessed. Blakely nods. "I've got to be able to do those superhero things: flying, picking up cars, and owning your environment. We have to deliver action across the platforms."

What emerges, then, is a game with a distinct twin-paced structure, and the result should be a unique experience for MMO players: a persistent world that foregrounds more action-based

won't be able to play as Batman, but you will get to meet him. "Why can't I play Batman?" asks Cao. "Because it's not a Batman game – it's a Universe game, and Batman already exists in that universe. This is about the player's story. There are already Batman and Superman games and they're not going to go away. Here you get to impress those characters, or even defeat them. We think that's interesting in a different way."

It's a risk, but also a pragmatic solution for delivering an MMO in a world of iconic characters.

To succeed, Cao's team must create a palpable sense of wider events going on around the players' own actions. And they're definitely taking the organic approach. "What if, as a villain, you decide to pick a fight with Superman?" Cao suggests. "You don't have to wait for the right quest: you do it by trashing downtown Metropolis. You're throwing around cars, then there's a streak of blue and Supes is right there. That's what we want. Or, as a hero, you watch Lex Luthor stab Supes with kryptonite, and you can step in." Even without a licence to prop it up, the ad-hoc structure Cao outlines would sound deliriously refreshing in an MMO, with no pelt-collecting or mushroom-gathering in sight, and the ability to deviate from the script on a whim. "It's not Disneyland," says Cao. "It's not the Batman ride. It's DC – the entire world."

MMO mechanics have survived, however, as long as they fit. "We have enough experience making MMOs now – those stalwarts are not going to change," says Blakely. "Take levels, for instance," continues Cao. "Levels let people feel powerful. Our game is all about feeling powerful, so it will be pretty classical power growth. The difference is the amount of time needed to level and the breadth of levelling. We have a concept called qualitative completion. You might find it in a skating game: it's not that you did the trick once, it's how well you did it. So anyone who wants to level gets what they want in a basic way, but if you're masterful, you get extra."

Alongside levels the team are promising there will still be quests and raids and instances, but with a focus on immediacy over grinding. But there's still the problem of superpowers. "It's a definite issue," sighs Cao. "You have Batman who has just grit and ingenuity. Then you have Superman who has actually made the planet turn the other way. But that's thinking like a game designer rather than a comic book writer. The solution is to think in terms of breaking characters down into their combinations of individual powers – laser eyes or flight, rather than direct strength, for example. In D&D, strength would feed into several different attributes. We simply give you speed-running, or a weaponisation skill, which solely feeds into how big an object you can pick up, so you know when you put experience points in weaponisation it leads exactly to that result, and doesn't do anything else. It's about building a variety

In shared areas, PvP is only allowed once a character has raised their 'threat' level by proactively causing trouble for other players. This should dissuade griefers from taking over in a game that lends itself to mucking about

of specific powers, rather than leveling one general attribute up so much it breaks the game."

It's a modular approach that should ensure Superman is fun to fight – a mixture of weaponisation, heat ray and flight – without being impossible to take down. Alongside that, the team seems to be planning careful use of smoke and mirrors. Cao uses the example of Black Adam, a powerful wizard. "He could easily destroy the world as he can in the comics. We can't balance him in the traditional sense. Instead, we use him judiciously – you have a fight with him in his lair, the Temple of Isis, and it's his home. He won't destroy it, so he won't be using all his powers, just some of them."

Alongside attack powers based on stalwarts like ice and electricity, players also choose a movement method, ranging from flight to acrobatics. The team is taking powers one at a time, making sure each works before moving on. They're already happy with flight, speed-running has just been added and is currently making everyone seasick, and teleportation is on the drawing board.

Combinations of these skills will go some way to making you feel special in a world where everyone else is special too, but it won't solve the problem completely, and Cao acknowledges that no amount of equippable decorations will hide that either. "Ultimately, making the player feel special comes down to having a good enough story. The traditional comic book stories are that the super-powered characters are the outcasts. We can't have that story. Instead, what we say is that, for some reason, the DC universe is suddenly flooded with millions of new heroes and villains. why? What we're saying is, in order for you to feel special, you now are the story, and you have to uncover why there are so many of you. And how to become more important than others."

It's hard to tell how this wider narrative will play out, but at least the game should look the part. Austin has enlisted Jim Lee, legendary founder of
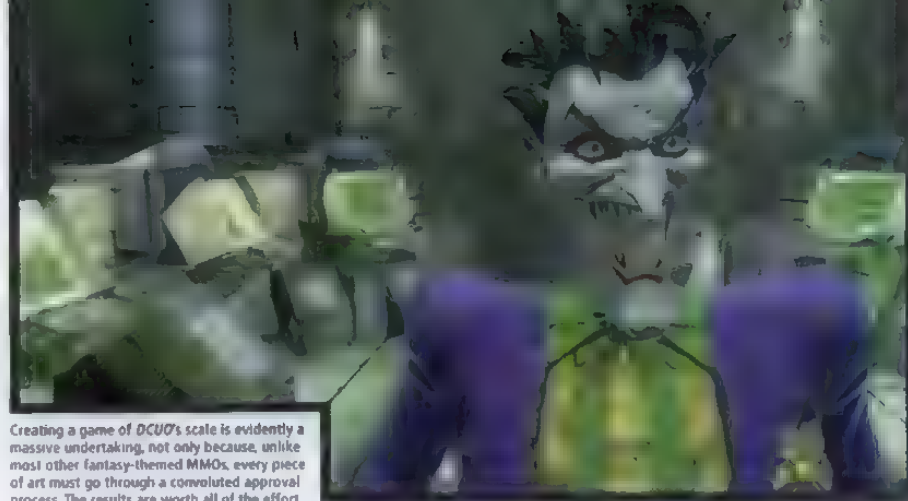
Creating a game of DCUO's scale is evidently a massive undertaking, not only because, unlike most other fantasy-themed MMOs, every piece of art must go through a convoluted approval process. The results are worth all of the effort

WildStorm comics, as executive creative director. An EverQuest devotee, Lee's involvement runs far deeper than cynics might expect. "Jim and his team drew everything in the game," explains Cao. "When we build Metropolis we need everything: trash cans, weathervanes, things that aren't in the movies and comics. What does Gotham look like? Why not ask the people who draw it on a daily basis?"

This focus on the world itself is particularly crucial because the landscape plays such a central role in the game. Like SOE Seattle's forthcoming title The

Agency, DCUO uses a mixture of large shared environments and spun-off instances rather than the open areas of WOW. The two shared areas revealed so far are, unsurprisingly, Metropolis and Gotham City, and they're far more than hubs: they're multipurpose playgrounds, where a lot of the game will unfold.

Given the chance to mess around in Metropolis it quickly becomes clear that Crackdown has loomed as large as EverQuest in Austin's thinking. The same focus on physics and verticality is uncanny, and we're soon yanking off satellite dishes and zipping around the rooftops like we've never been away. The wide

avenues, gleaming golden light and sleek art deco skyscrapers may be unmistakable to fans of the comic books, but the inherent gameplay strongly invokes Crackdown's own Pacific City. Cao stresses the cities are volumetric – there will be crimes and distractions everywhere, on every level, and Realtime Worlds' mentality of "landscape as time-waster" should help alleviate the content burnout problems suffered by other MMOs.

Although we're playing a PC build, the PS3 controller is available, and it's surprising how well the

MESSING AROUND IN METROPOLIS, IT QUICKLY BECOMES CLEAR THAT CRACKDOWN HAS LOOMED AS LARGE AS EVERQUEST IN AUSTIN'S THINKING

game has survived the transition from the keyboard. A click of the right stick is all that's needed to take flight, targeting is handled with the right trigger, and your chosen loadout of offensive and defensive moves are mapped to the face buttons and D-pad respectively. It may seem like a lot to remember, but it quickly becomes natural.

Metropolis is still awaiting the eventual influx of pedestrians a later build will deliver, but it's already an entertaining playpen, covered with Havok physics-enabled cars and lampposts to uproot and chuck around, and spacious enough to house the dozens rather than hundreds of supermen each server will eventually host, whether they choose to dash around the rooftops searching for the best hidden ledges or take to the avenues for impromptu games of bus football.

Leaving Metropolis behind, it's time to see some combat. Cao takes us to an instanced PvP arena, the Temple of Isis, an Egyptian tomb complete with sputtering torches and sarcophagi to heft up and smack people around with. Playing a frantic and impromptu four-versus-four, DCUO couldn't be more different from most MMOs. It's fast and messy, but player powers come together to create plenty of surprises. Ad-hoc combos are the order of the day: someone might turn you into an ice block, then before you can escape, the ice block, which has become a physics object, is picked up by someone else and lofted across the room into an altogether innocent bystander. "We're putting toys in more than abilities," admits Cao. "People internally are saying, with the ice things, the state effects, and

From left: John Blakely (vice president of development), Michael Daubert (art director) and Chris Cao (creative director) recently came under new management. SOE now reports to SCE, not Sony Pictures. The dev team now has full PlayStation 3 hardware support in-house, which is clearly transforming its console work

SOE Austin is making use of Kynapse to quickly iterate large chunks of the gameworld (below is a section of Metropolis – Metropolis Park is visible in its centre) and lay down automated AI paths (the red sections below are off-limits to pedestrians, for example). Using Kynapse is saving the team "hundreds of hours" of manual AI work
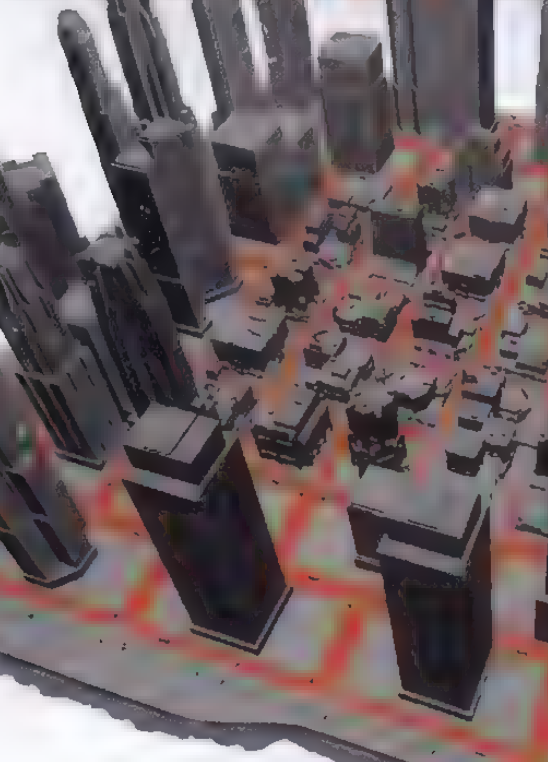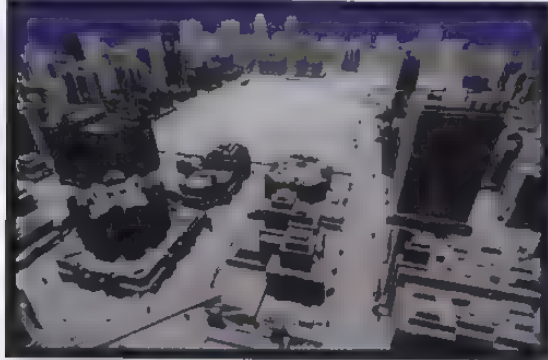
STORYVILLE

It's a truth universally acknowledged that MMOs have yet to get the tricky business of storytelling perfectly pinned down – and DCUO may not be the game to do that. "Narrative is important," says Cao, "but drama is more important for this licence Narrative is more of a context. The real narrative we have is a lot more like sports. It's, 'Oh my goodness, we fought Metallo in his lair, and he pushed you into a vat of acid and you totally died!' It's like when you're playing football: 'You kicked the ball off the guy's head and then I got a touchdown". But a strong narrative framework still gives it depth 'Man, Batman was pissed at me last night because he asked for help and I went off to do something else'. That's far more powerful than 'I've completed the Batman story arc'."

The DC licence permeates even to a tech level, with the last good build of the game known among the dev team as the Fortress of Solitude, and the various daily builds nicknamed Krypton, "because it's like being on an exploding planet," laughs Cao

weaponising objects, that we're putting a lot of exploits in there," adds Blakely. "I'm thinking, well, maybe that's what superheroes are '

At th s point, the combat still has the unmistakable slight floatiness that lag-buffered MMOs tend to del ver, but the weighty animations and unfinished effects are already making up for it, and it's a far more visceral game than WOW or City Of Heroes The defining impression is one of speed – everything from basic movement to the pace of fights has real zip, and even in the middle of a pitched battle you're never more than a few seconds away from an opportunity to escape or land a finishing blow The comic pile-ups of tights-clad bodies may suggest Mystery Men more than the Justice League, but the battles are far from being pantomimes – even at this early stage, PvP manages to balance the available suite of powers, giving each player a moment to take the limelight

And the promised freewheel ng mission structure is becoming apparent, too Although the temple is a PvP arena, there are various command points that can be occupied to gain power advantages in the battle If all these posts are taken, though, Black Adam, the temple's owner, arrives, and the game switches from PvP skirmish to PvE boss encounter It's scripted, but it's not forced, and if Austin can keep the missions as organic as this, it will be a delight when compared to the rigid tasks of WOW

There's still a good year left of deve opment and plenty Austin hasn't discussed yet, such as pricing models, Home integration, and something more tantalising an alter-ego system which provides a much slower pace, and will also allow for item crafting But our playtest leaves us hopeful that persistent worlds may finally be taking root on consoles Crucially, although we're playing with a Sixaxis, DCUO is a solid and recognisable MMO, and the only adjustments have been made for the temperament of a console player rather than the limitations of the hardware The game's faster, chunkier, prettier, and perhaps slightly sill er than its PC peers, but that doesn't mean it's lacking in depth

or shorn of thoughtful nuance. Cao and his team want people to play for 20 minutes and get something out of it, but they also want people to play for hours at a time, and while there are scrappy PvP encounters to jump straight into, we're also shown plans for more elaborate, multi-stage investigation quests leading to raids in a number of surprising locations.

"We've done this before," laughs Blakely when we ask if he's bothered by Microsoft cancelling Marvel Universe, citing an inability to compete. "I don't think Microsoft have resolved how to make a return on subscriptions services. They need to resolve that as an organisation. It's really hard to make these games, then it's really hard to run them, then it's really hard to run them at a profit. Since I've been at SOE, we've made a profit every year – it's been bumpy sometimes, but we've done it."

But there's still a lot of competition – from Sony itself with The Agency, and from NCSoft, which has also chosen PS3 as its platform for console MMOs. And then, of course, on PCs there's WOW. "WOW's got a momentum of its own, but if you look at the core demographic of what we're going after, we're not going after the same thing," says Blakely. "My expectation is we're going to be opening up the MMO audience to include the action audience too."

There's a confidence to Blakely and Cao as they demo their game, but it's a confidence born of experience: they're not certain that they're making an instant hit so much as they're certain they've got what it takes to work on the game until it becomes the title their audience want. Again, SWG is a good example: they stuck with it when it came close to crumbling, and five years after release, subscriber numbers are actually rising. So perhaps the greatest asset Austin has is not Batman and Superman at all. Instead, it's something they'd both appreciate: street smarts and granite-jawed determination ⬛

I'M OVERPOWERED

Players used to the incremental growth of powers in most MMOs will be surprised how much Austin is handing over at the start. Choosing flight doesn't mean you start off hopping and work your way up; you start flying, and can then level up for specific flight moves and attacks. "The fantasy hero's journey is vastly different from the superhero's journey," says Cao. "Fantasy is more rags to riches, where you start with nothing. The superhero's journey is much more internal – you start with a certain amount of powers, and rather than get vastly more powerful, you just learn to use them and refine them."

The speed of the combat means players have to choose a loadout of just four abilities for each encounter – idly clicking through the typical MMO list of options would be a sure path to getting a lamppost in the stomach

Q&A: JIM LEE

Can you tell us a little about your background as a gamer, and particularly your involvement with EverQuest? We've heard that you were one of the most hardcore players back then.
Absolutely – I started EQ at launch and got to witness the world servers crash repeatedly from the load. But it was so amazingly fun that all you could do was curse the skies and keep trying to log back in. I played pretty hardcore in various guilds and ended up being in the first wave of 50s on my server, so I got to be a part of the first Nagafen and Vox raids, not to mention breaking into the Planes of Fear and Sky. I played a Paladin and actually got the first epic on my server back in the day when there was just one class that had epics. It still remains in my memory one of the most immersive games because, like real life, so much of the world and the way the game worked was unknown to the players at the time. Now, with all the gamer walkthrough sites like Allakhazam's and whatnot, and all the add-ons you see like in World Of Warcraft and the developers giving you the information you didn't know before, you get to see behind the curtain, so to speak, which makes the games feel more like the elaborate series of computations that they are and less like a virtual world mimicking real life. Looking back on it now, EQ was definitely one of the most extreme games, with the kill stealing, the trains to zone, the corpse runs and the experience death penalties, etc, etc, but I loved it.

How involved with the creative process of DC Universe Online have you been able to be?
My responsibilities on DCUO are twofold. Firstly, I am the executive creative director for DC on the game, which essentially means I act as the eyes and ears for DC on the game. We want it to mirror the tone and feel of the DCU and be a kickass hybrid between a traditional MMO and a firstperson action console game, so from a very global perspective I have my nose in every aspect of the game – except probably the technical backbone side of things. I don't know enough about how these games are technically put together with all the software, just that we need the tech to make the world come to life [laughs]. So that means I have reviews with the lead creatives on the game and get to give my two cents on gameplay and storylines and world arc and what the game should be. Secondly, I am guiding the team at my company, WildStorm, to do all the concept art for the game, so nearly every building, costume, vehicle and environment originates from the top-drawer team of comic book artists I have assembled at WildStorm. Talents like JJ Kirby, Carlos D'Anda, Michael Lopez, Livio Ramondelli, Eddy Nuñez, Oliver Nome have really blossomed and matured while creating art for the game, and I think people are going to be blown away by the results.

What are the challenges for a comic book artist working in videogames? Have you learned any new insights about the way you draw, just by working on this project?
Oh God, yes – so many that it would be difficult to list. Seriously, drawing comics and developing and refining a style for videogames are two different
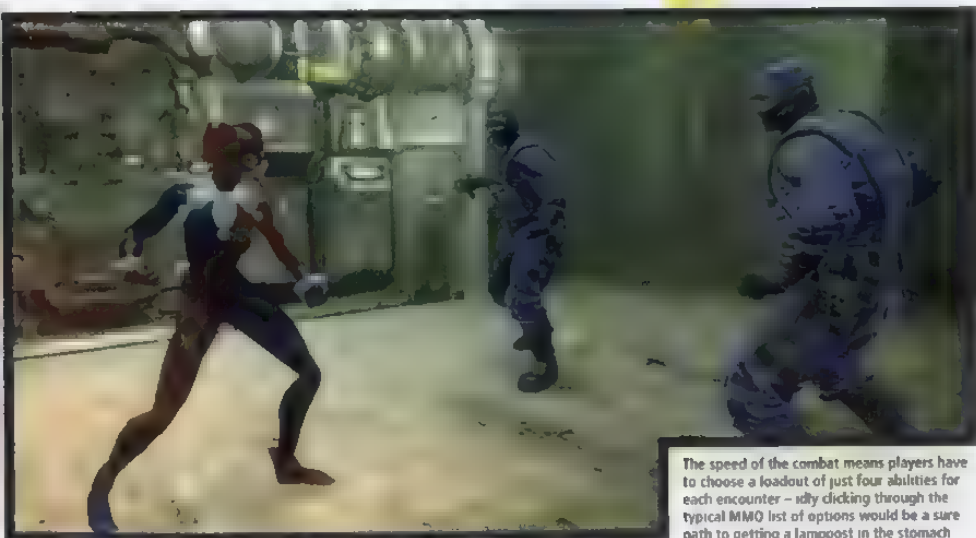
animals As 2D artists working in print, we have so many luxuries to work with, [like] being able to draw characters at different sizes and proportions depending on the impact we want to create with a particular image or shot Being able to choose and set the lighting, angle and composition of the shot is an integral part of how people define their artistic style You don't have the same degree of control in the gaming world. You do, but it's always an interplay between what you code and set and what the player does in terms of positioning his character, toggling various video settings, etc And because the figures are moving and much smaller on a typical monitor than on a printed page, I find some of the proportions and subtle stylistic elements I use in my comic work get lost on the screen, so you in effect have to go in and be bolder and broader with some of the shapes It's like stage makeup working on monitors requires stronger stage makeup to get the same emotional impact we normally get on print

You've said with comics that your art style has changed significantly from the first issue to the last – has it changed in the case of this game?
Yes Any time you draw a character repeatedly,

their way back into the comics and films?
Absolutely, and I think that's why having someone who is familiar with both worlds working on the game will be a difference maker I can't begin to tell you the number of times we have created something cool for the game and then gotten on the horn with Dan Didio [senior vice president – executive editor DC Universe] and pitched the model or environment or costume for use in future DCU continuity. And Dan's asked us to take stabs at revisualising certain DC icons for use in the game and in the comics And, of course, we can tie in future DC tentpole events and translate the stories for the gaming world and have them occur simultaneously The possibilities are numerous and very exciting, as you can imagine

Your art is particularly expressive, especially with things such as Batman's cape – have you been able to capture this same sense of exaggeration and expressionism in the game where you're less able to select the best angle and so on?
Actually, I asked the tech guys if we could have capes changing in length depending on the situation in-game and I got the 'Are you crazy? Who let this guy

"THE ART TEAM AT WILDSTORM PRODUCE ALL THE CONCEPT ART FOR THE GAME. I THINK PEOPLE ARE GOING TO BE BLOWN AWAY BY THE RESULTS"

think the choices you make stylistically become more refined and streamlined in the production pipelines of your brain Look at the first drawings of Mickey Mouse or The Simpsons and what they look like now, you see an evolution and slickness to the lines and shapes that didn't exist before And my take on Batman changed in the two years or so I worked on Hush and also again on my two years on All Star Batman And Robin And, yes, if you look at my first round of body archetypes for the DCUO and the last final versions, I think you see a lot of growth and learning going on ways characters have to be put together so their limbs don't collide with other parts of their bodies, the way characters shorten up when the camera is looking down on them over their shoulders, ways to make backs and butts look more exciting – 'cause that's what you're looking at all the time playing the game [laughs]

Are you hoping for a two-way conversation between the game and DC itself, with elements from the game eventually working

in the room?' look [laughs] So we lose that ability that and the power of intense foreshortening – but it's all a tradeoff, you know 'Cause we get movement and sound which we can only fake in print Those are such awesome tools to play with having the drone in a Star labs facility or the drip-drip of water leaking in Arkham Asylum with crazy laughter in the background So you learn how to create atmosphere and set the scene using other tools than the ones you are used to playing with in 2D print. Lately I've been thinking about colour and texture palettes and how to translate the ones we use in comics to the 3D world 'cause in a way, the tools we have at our disposal in videogames are too powerful. Everything starts looking the same 'cause everyone is trying to max out 'realism', but to me, it just starts looking a bit generic, so I've been thinking about ways to translate what we produce in comics to the 3D world which do a better job of bridging the realism that rendering engines give you today and the styling and look of 2D comics I'll let you know when I figure that one out [laughs]
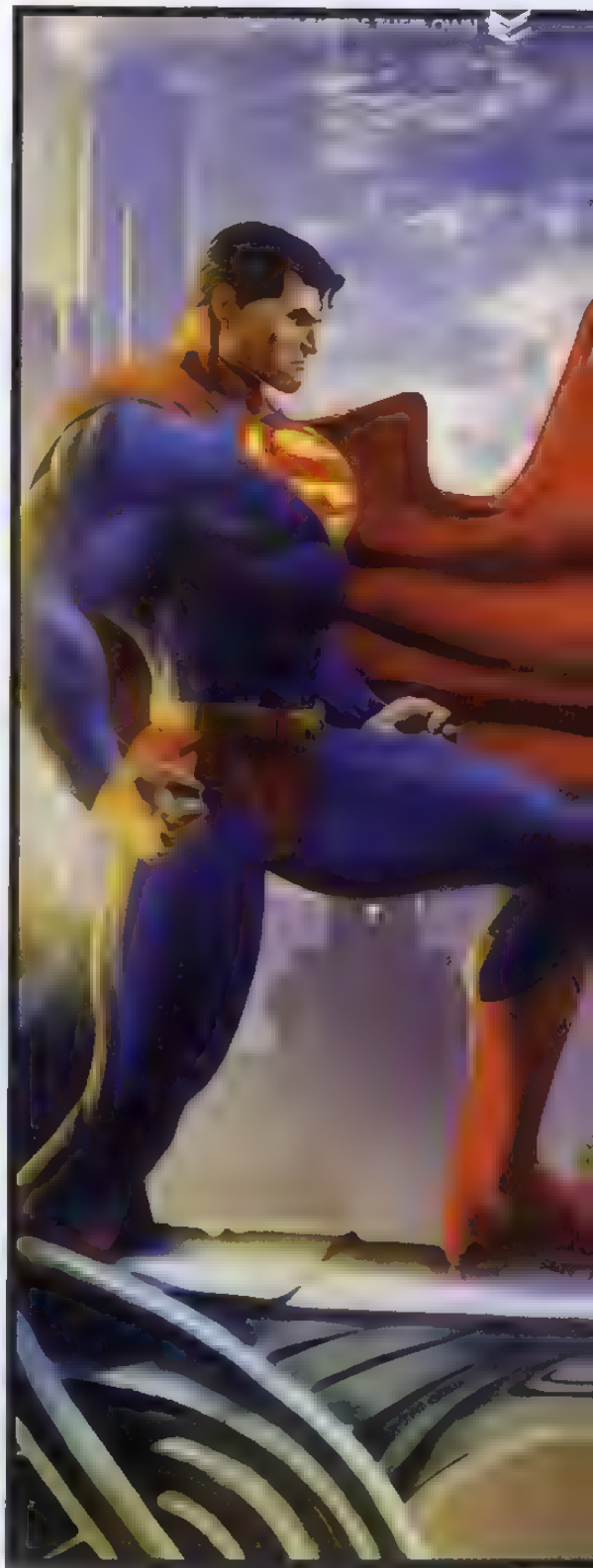
"THIS IS HOW YOU MAKE SUCCESSFUL GAMES"

rare ... of sega's final Dreamcast releases offered its fans the chance to do it all again – and, in doing so, change the ending of a story that in real life concluded in tragic fashion

THE VERY FIRST PITCH

BEING A SEGA FAN
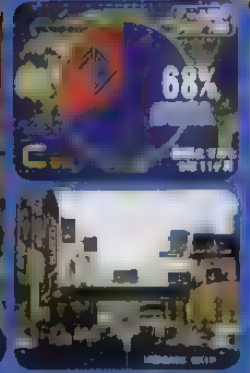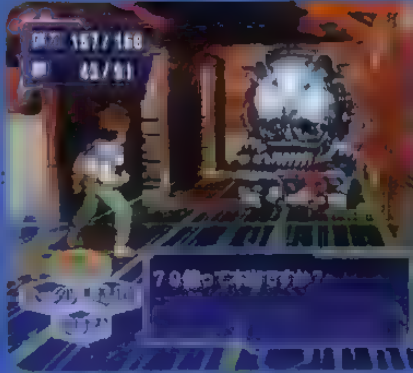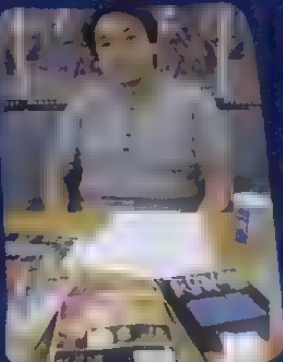
Since the release of SGGG, Okano has worked on a number of titles including Treasure's Game Boy Advance productions Astro Boy, Advance Guardian Heroes and Gunstar Super Heroes.

DEVELOPMENT DIFFICULTIES

"The hardest thing was to keep the project secret. I believed that there would be very little anyone could do about it once the game was completed, but up to that moment, anything could have happened if someone found about the game's development. I'm basically a mangaka (comic artist), so in a way I know about direction. In that sense I was able to put many of my own personal skills into this title knowing the limited scale of its development, which went well because I had no opportunities to ask for anyone's else help inside Sega."

THE MEANING OF SEGAGAGA

"It was a name that I just wrote on my early game design document. There is no special meaning. There is absolutely no relation with the song Radio Ga Ga! In my memo note, the two names that remained to title the game design document were 'Sega Sega' and 'Segagaga'. I was advised to put Sega in the game title but I didn't think it was too cool to do so. I chose the one which included the reference to Sega but with in addition a touch that made the 'Sega factor' less intrusive."

TAKING CHARGE

"Let's say that I was the project! More seriously, I was involved in every aspect of the game. I designed the game but also supervised the program, the sound, the graphics – everything. I was director, producer – everything from just one being: me! I was also in charge of promoting the game. You have to understand that we – so, I – had just about ¥30,000 (£142) to promote this title! I used ¥20,000 (£94) to get a mask made that I could use to go and promote the game everywhere! This mask was made by a true professional pro-wrestler. In many ways, the game established some industry firsts in terms of budgets alone!"

LITTLE FIXES

...

"...could come up with was a shrimp! In Japanese, 'car' is ... we eat here in Japan which is named 'kuruma ebi'! It was ..."

USING SEGA AS A 'LICENCE'

... serious matter, I'm a man of ideas. I mean that I really like thinking and imagining new ideas. Sega is not a company of ideas, it is a company of ... simulating the human body, for instance. We were hardware-driven since ... out of. I always thought that licences were a great way of getting people's attention, especially with popular licences. But they are very expensive – it's hard to make any money out of them. Then I realised that Sega had many ...

The ... with properties from Sega's rich history – and not only visual motifs, but audio ones, too

SALES SUCCESS

"To be honest, I don't remember how many we sold, exactly. But I recall the game doing quite well. At first we decided to sell the game only through our online store, Sega Direct, which is closed now. There were also talks to sell the game at the Comike (a large Japanese amateur comic event). When we started to sell the game on our online store, it was instantly popular. That convinced us to go with a normal store release as well. Later, it was even turned into a Dorikore (budget Dreamcast Collection) release. Following the release, I have to admit that I did not follow sales, but I was told it did quite well. When you know that our development costs were low, this turned out to be a very good release. But I realised one thing with SGGG: a game should not be made with limited resources. It is far better to put in the resources and have bigger ambitions."

USING SEGA AS INSPIRATION

USING SEGA'S STAR DESIGNERS

THE CHANGING FACE OF SEGA

STICKING AT IT

BRAZILIAN PIRACY AND A NOD TO SHOOT 'EM UP CULTURE

[illegible]

THE NOT-SO-BIG RELEASE

As I said, I didn't have much money to promote the game. But, again, some great people stepped in. Our star PR, Mr [Tadashi] Takezaki, and Mr [Taku Sasahara of AM3 really invested their energy and creativity in promoting the game in any ways they could. This really influenced the popularity of the title and ultimately its sales. For example, they even managed to get the game a full-page story in the newspapers! It was uneasy for me trying to keep secrets on this game while also asking for help in promoting it. But Mr Takezaki and Mr Sasahara both found the idea of the game very fun and wanted to help make it a success. Their efforts, combined with the official end of the Dreamcast, made the game some kind of a symbol, and that made it sell quite well.

The greatest memory I have from the release was the tour we made in Akihabara. Normally you would invite a celebrity to sign copies on a tour that would go via Tokyo, Osaka and Nagoya, for instance, and players would get their copy singed at launch events. But, hey, we didn't have any money for that so we thought up the Akihabara tour! With my mask I was of course the guy who would to sign the copies of the game. So we had a four-location tour throughout this one district of Tokyo! I was amazed that fans went through the four locations buying a copy at each one and getting me to sign them. We had the Sega Shinja, the 'Sega believers', and they loved the company so much they would buy every single title we released. For fun, we made the four locations sacred Sega places, and gave them Shinja ranks – from Master System Shinja to Dream Shinja. This created a unique relationship between us and our fans."

THE ACTUAL BUDGET

[illegible]

SH!

As Super Smash Bros finally arrives in the UK, we talk to series creator Masahiro Sakurai about how his cuddly fighter evolved to become one of Nintendo's biggest, most valuable franchises

There's something about that title Super Smash Bros that goes beyond the simple echo of Super Mario Bros. 'Smash' has an aggregation of meanings: to beat, throw something, or even to force things together. 'Bros' isn't altogether accurate: the roster is comprised of characters that straddle genres, genera and gender. But it's clear what the words imply: a jamboree of related fighters and knockabout fun for all the family.

There's a point to these semantic games. Smash Bros is a series that sits uneasily in the Kyoto canon: in a field of individual series that have their own clearly defined identities, it gleefully squirrels away characters, stages, power-ups and ideas. It has almost no surface element that hasn't already been in another

game: it's a thief circling around Nintendo's back catalogue looking for the valuables.

This makes it difficult to describe to the uninitiated, even in terms as basic as genre. It's ostensibly a fighting game, but shares nothing in common with other fighting games. The differences in mechanics could be outlined at length, but they all come down to a core concept that informs everything about it and fuels both its critical success and the occasional incomprehension of its appeal. The thing is, from the very start, Super Smash Bros was intended for the uninitiated.

Those beginnings were at HAL Laboratory in 1997. The Nintendo 64 console had recently been released, and **Masahiro Sakurai**, the creator of Kirby, and Satoru Iwata, the man

who would later lead Nintendo, needed some inspiration. "We were looking at this mysterious piece of hardware," begins Sakurai, "and thinking 'How will we make something for it?' The thing that stuck out on the hardware was the four controller ports, and so a fourplayer game became the most interesting idea. Then came the concept: a game where one player grabs another and then throws or kicks them into space off a platform.

From this basic idea, Sakurai and Iwata privately devoted weekends and evenings to building a prototype of Kakuto-Geemu Ryuoh ('Dragon King Fighting Game'). "At the time I was toying with Softimage so I did the modelling and the animation, and Iwata-san did the programming. Between the two of us we knocked something together." The prototype met with support from HAL, "but there was something missing," continues Sakurai. "We needed characterisation – out of this came the idea that Nintendo characters would be the way to move this idea forward – it was, after all, a Nintendo machine." The agreement was doubtless helped by the fact that Iwata and Sakurai had mocked up a demo without Nintendo's permission (see 'You've gotta have Snake') but regardless, the game that had been known as both Dragon King Fighting Game and Four Player Battle Royale began to take shape as Super Smash Bros.

Despite the presence of Nintendo's brands however, there was uneasiness about whether the game would be a big seller. It was seen as more of a cult title than a potential hit, and the budget for both development and marketing

reflected this. "Nintendo didn't think it would sell that much, no," says Sakurai. "So when it was released the push wasn't so great." In fact, Super Smash Bros was intended to be a Japan-only release – but immediately on its release in January 1999 began selling in huge quantities and was quickly prepared for a North American release (Europe had to wait almost a year). And although he won't be drawn further, Sakurai adds: "I always knew if it got into people's hands then word-of-mouth and it's not hard to play, you know? If it got out there then it might create its own momentum. I always believed that. And it has."

The rented Tokyo office in which Brawl was made. By the time we arrived, all of the team's kit was in boxes ready to be shipped out

"IT'S NOT HARD TO PLAY, YOU KNOW? IF IT GOT OUT THERE IT MIGHT CREATE ITS OWN MOMENTUM. AND IT HAS"

And how. A conservative estimate of sales for the series would be well above 16 million units worldwide – Super Smash Bros Melee was the biggest selling game on GameCube (one copy was sold for every three consoles in Japan), and Super Smash Bros Brawl has thus far sold five million copies worldwide even before its European release. They're sales figures that few fighting games can match, and the secret behind the success may lie in Sakurai's observation above – which also, of course, opens up the can of worms labelled 'button mashing'.
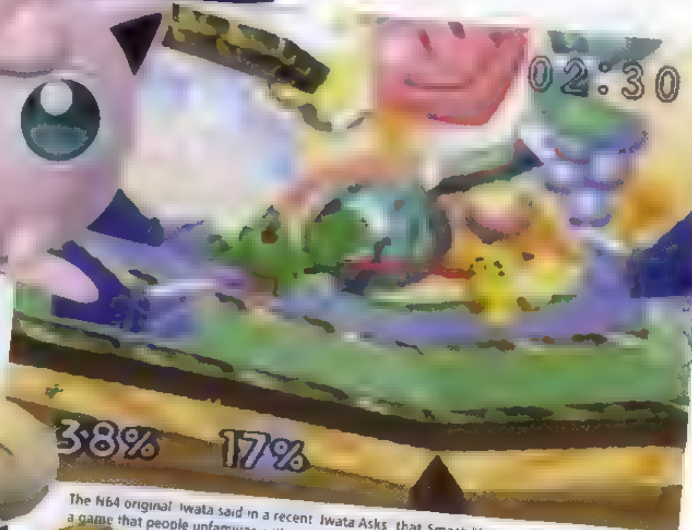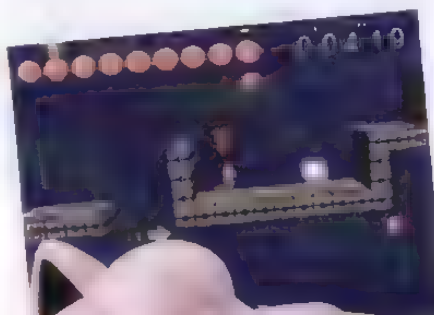
The N64 original. Iwata said in a recent Iwata Asks that Smash "began with the idea of making a game that people unfamiliar with gaming could come to enjoy just as much as everyone else"

Build-your-own stages were an interesting direction for Smash Bros Brawl – particularly since the environment dictates tactics and ▮▮ unapologetically favour certain varieties of character in the game

Making games accessible for anyone
is vastly different from making simple games
and Smash Bros can confuse even the most
august critics: does it have 'one of the most
enduringly innovative and deep systems of any
fighter (E187), or is it 'scrappy and ultimately
monotonous' E106 ? Sakurai's response to
the charge of button mashing is surprising –
he laughs and puts his hands up – guilty as
charged. "It's definitely something that's there
and that's important, and that I want to keep in
the series. You might be far better than me, but
who knows? I might get lucky and pull off a
result – and that's essential," he says, before
picking up a GameCube pad and waving it in
front of us. "You could even think of the big
green button as your cheering button. Press it,
press it, press it, yeeeaaahhh! That element has
to be there. It gives broader appeal beyond the
dedicated players."

It's important to emphasise that Sakurai
also wants Smash Bros to reward those players
who are dedicated, an aspect of the game
that's obvious when we come to play against
him. He skips between characters ("It depends
what mood I'm in") and leans intently forward
before delivering a sound pummelling to
all comers. Oddly, Nintendo doesn't want us to
mention the results of the various bouts: suffice
it to say Sakurai knew his own game. It's also
clear that, even through it's a bad habit to refer
to senior game creators as solely responsible for
titles they work on, Sakurai's critical to the
Smash Bros series. He's a little coy on the

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importance that Nintendo now assigns to it and by extension, himself - a question about the change in expectations is met with a fairly sideways reply, about character polygon counts (200 on N64 and 2,000 on GameCube - if you're interested) - but there could be no clearer indication than Iwata's fierce desire to have him assemble and lead the team developing *Super Smash Bros Brawl*.

There's an interesting story here. Iwata, who had by this time risen to be Nintendo's president, announced the game without Sakurai's knowledge at E3 in 2005. "It was just a bolt from the blue," says Sakurai. "I knew nothing about it. I heard the announcement and just thought 'Well, OK'. And I'd had meetings with Iwata-san where he'd said anything on this front would be passed by me first." Iwata claims he had intended only to tease the possibility of a wifi-enabled *Smash Bros* for Wii, but the hunger for a new title turned a tease into a cast-iron official announcement.

"After the announcement we had a meeting in a hotel room," continues Sakurai. "Iwata-san seemed to have in his mind then that he could ask HAL to do it, or an internal development team, but in order for it to be a part of the series then I had to be involved." A nearby employee politely interjects at this point, telling us that Iwata went even further and said that if Sakurai hadn't signed on, it would have been better to take the GameCube version and simply add an online mode."
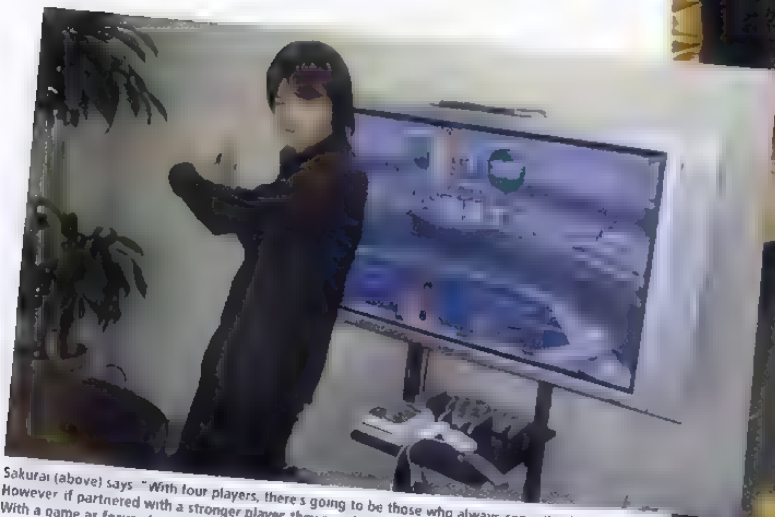
Sakurai (above) says: "With four players, there's going to be those who always come third or fourth. However if partnered with a stronger player, they now have the chance to taste the thrill of victory." With a game as focused on multiplayer as this, the testing process requires plenty of joypads (right)

It's a measure of the man that there's no trace of entitlement or vanity while he outlines how the head of the most powerful videogame company in the world headhunted him to deliver a crucial title. And as the conversation wears on the qualities of Sakurai that Nintendo values become clear. When concepting, he says: "The first step would be to realise it's a mistake to take your first step as a developer. I have to take my developer's head off and think with my gamer head. Because as soon as you start to think like a developer then you go off on the wrong track." When discussion comes to the intricate layers of Smash Bros' characters, levels and trophies, he insists. "There's no organised process on my head or paper for keeping
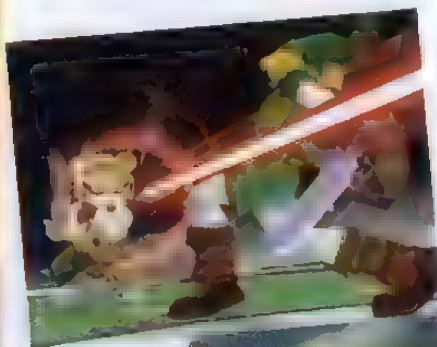
snippets. It's all about what the game needs – what's enjoyable to play, what's enjoyable to play with people, what's enjoyable to watch people play – and obviously I have my memories of what I've played over the years. That surfaces.

But Sakurai's theoretical side is allied to a keen commercial sense. the Smash Bros Dojo website that was launched to provide updates on Brawl as it neared completion was one of the greatest marketing innovations for videogames in recent memory, whipping fan anticipation to hyper levels. "Thank you for the compliment because that was the very idea," says 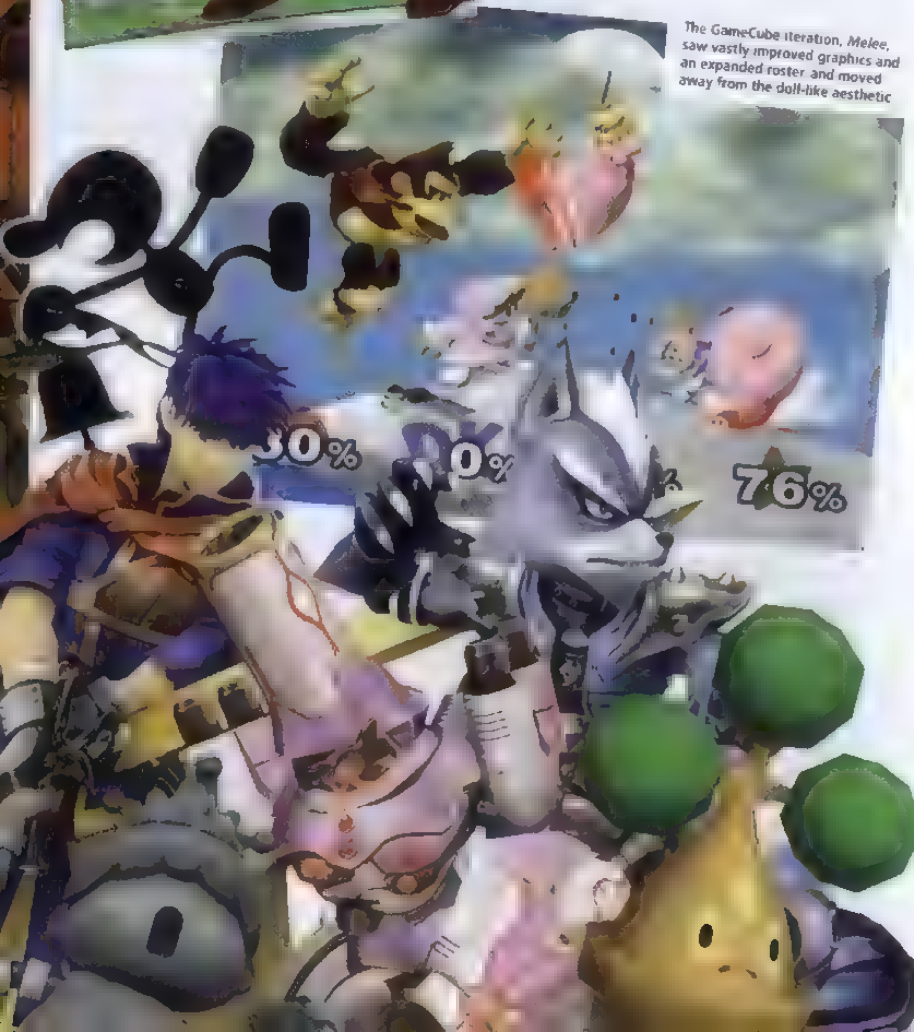Sakurai. "It's something we're proud of, and was in the first design sheet for the game way back when it was my pet project. I wanted all languages on that website, and several updates a week – but when we saw the reaction to it we knew it had to become daily. It felt very organic for me, and created its own success." The Dojo only stopped updating in April, and at one point attracted 7,150,000 visitors in a week – a result of countless links (and weekly roundups) from

"I HAVE TO THINK WITH MY GAMER HEAD. AS SOON AS YOU THINK LIKE A DEVELOPER THEN YOU GO OFF ON THE WRONG TRACK"

The GameCube iteration, Melee, saw vastly improved graphics and an expanded roster and moved away from the doll-like aesthetic

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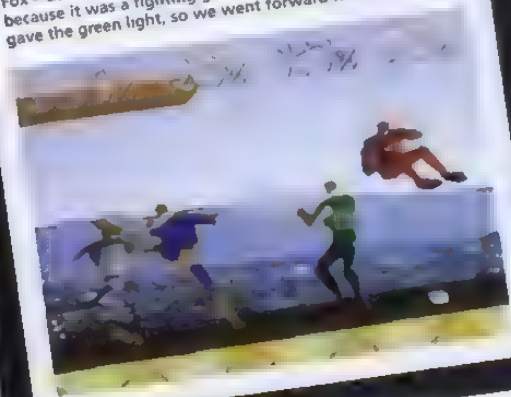
popular videogame websites that saw a source for constant new content. It will be fascinating to watch the influence of the Dojo on future game marketing.

After the critical and commercial success of Brawl, the series is now a cornerstone of Nintendo's game division and is certain to be continued (Sakurai at one point muses that DS would be a perfect fit). He insists that while he's happy with the reception of Brawl, "I'd never give it full marks – there's so much, so many ideas and concepts, that never made it this far. When I look at it I think 'I wish that was in here' or 'I wish we could do that'. But you put your best into it." And despite his protests, Brawl is arguably as complete as Smash Bros can get using its current model. Is there really anywhere to go? "We've put a lot on the table for this one – there's 39 characters in it – and if I was going to make another and upped it to 50, would that be better? No, it wouldn't make a difference.

Regardless, there will be calls in the future for Sakurai to return to the series that has consumed most of his energies for the last decade as a developer. "If users and people around the world ... if they demand and need another one then I would be interested in making another. But there would also have to be a line in the sand for me – nothing small, a big change in the series, a difference to the fundamentals of the game," he admits. But one thing won't change as long as Sakurai's in charge. Smash Bros will remain a button-masher. And if it comes to that, then, at least in terms of fighting games it'll probably be the best button-masher in the world.

FROM FRAGS TO RICHES

The life and times of John Romero – superstar FPS designer,
Apple Macintosh addict… and budding MMO revolutionary

S o, first you shampoo. Use Finesse;
Pantene in a pinch. Rinse, condition,
and give it three minutes to soak in.
Rinse again, and towel-dry your radiant
mane as much as you can. If you're naturally
a bit wavy, now's the time to apply some
straightener to your unruliest follicles. Next,
flick your hair over your face and blowdry,
gently brushing towards the floor as you do.
Be strong – you need to wait until it's
completely arid, or you'll curl up. Slip on a
ponytail holder for five minutes – more, if
you have the time – and when you're done,
massage a drop of Sebastian Laminates
Drops between your palms. Apply the
solution evenly, ensuring that you don't
over-grease your roots.

We're a little perturbed that after
two-and-a-half hours of conversation, we
still know more about **John Romero**'s
hair-care regime than his new MMO.

After all, throughout the '90s, Romero
(along with Peter Molyneux) was one of
the videogame industry's most outspoken
figureheads. During his tenure at id
Software, he joyously imparted information
about every new feature his games would
implement to ravenous fans. Nowadays, all
he'll let slip is the genre: Romero's fallen in
love with online worlds. "I really like them,"
he enthuses. "I love what an MMO is. I'm
insane about *World Of WarCraft*. It's just
such an awesome game. And after playing
it, I thought, 'I just I have to do an MMO –
it's the next big thing.'"

While *WOW*'s ten-million-plus subscriber
figures might be a persuasive factor, it's
impossible to take Romero's enthusiasm
as disingenuous. He's felt it for all the
projects on which he's worked in a career
that spans three decades. In fact, it's his
ebullient attitude towards videogames that
should have made him the eternal gamer's
game designer. But life, work, fame and
tragedy got in the way.

Born on October 28, 1967, in Colorado
Springs, USA, Romero fell in love with
videogames at first sight. *Targ* (an Exidy
arcade game from 1980) was the one to pop
his cherry. "It was like: 'What is this thing?'"
he says. "And then you got it. Back then, it
was this new thing no one had experienced.
Ever. A machine that could play things! After
a while, I thought: 'You know, I need to
figure out how to make these!'"

He got his opportunity in the summer of
'79, when a college friend took 11-year-old
Romero and his brother to the local campus
and showed them the terminals there. The
games available were text adventures;
Romero wasn't enthralled by them, but he
started making his own, saving his work on
punch-cards. When one day those cards fell
off his bike into a puddle on the way back
to the campus, he knew it was time to get
a home computer. "And when I did," he
says, "I lived on the thing."

He was a fast learner. Romero's passion
for computers was obvious, but his parents
were nonplussed. "I'd show them to my

mother," he laughs, "and she'd be like: 'Oh, that's nice, honey'." In fact, it wasn't until he got his first prestigious industry job that they accepted he might have a future in games. That job was at Origin Systems. Determined to become a part of the game industry once and for all, Romero travelled to the '87 Applesoft festival in San Francisco. After politely turning down several job offers based on prior recognition – Nibble magazines were strewn throughout the area, with Romero's games on some of the covers – he made his way to the Origin stand. A line of Apple IIs were on display, showing off different games. Romero saw no problem with switching off the *Ultima I* port playing on one system, and popping in his own – a game written using the hardware's tricky double-resolution graphics mode. Origin's PR was shocked by Romero's bravado, but the gamble ultimately got him a job.

At Origin, Romero was tasked with porting an Apple II game over to the Commodore 64. He quickly discovered he didn't need to rewrite the whole thing. "It was much more efficient for me to just take the game's code, and modify it on the Commodore. Cross-development. So I basically said: 'This is what I'm going to do, so where's your cable to get this stuff over to the Commodore?' And they were like: 'Uhh, that doesn't exist. Nobody's put out a cable that communicates between the Apple II and the Commodore'. So I went out to RadioShack, and I got this telephone cable; it had four wires in it, and I soldered the wires to the different pins in the Commodore based off the schematics for the system. Then I wrote some code to accept data from the Apple II, saved it, and ran it. After I did that, they gave me a 25 per cent raise.".

Despite being well regarded at Origin, Romero left to try independence again, forming an ill-fated company with another colleague. Greater success was found at the company he formed in 1988 with his co-worker Lane Roathe. Ideas From The Deep gave him plenty of programming challenges, but the income proved unsteady, so he started looking for a job again. In March 1989, Romero found one. "Jay Wilbur was getting a job at Softdisk," he explains. "Jay told them about us, so I called Softdisk and said: 'I need to talk to the president', whose name was Al Lekovius. Al flew me down immediately with Lane. We had a barbecue. It wasn't freezing cold, it was Louisiana. Hot. Awesome. I was like: 'I gotta get down here.'"

It was the decision that led Romero to game-making megastardom.

Not immediately, though. He had to wade through application development before he convinced Lekovius to let him form his own game-centred division, Gamer's Edge. While hiring staff, Romero found John Carmack. He and Carmack developed an instant camaraderie due to their mutual obsession: coding. They "pounded out code" for days and nights, heavy metal the only discernable background noise. Carmack did graphics engines while Romero made development tools. For Romero, it was heaven. Then Carmack changed PC gaming forever.

"I came in one morning," Romero says softly, "and there was a disk on my keyboard with 'Run me' written on it. I ran the Dave2.exe file on the disk, and I saw this *Super Mario 3* screen come up with one of my characters – Dangerous Dave – and as soon as he got close to the right of the screen, it scrolled smoothly. I'd never seen a PC do that before. I was just destroyed. It was only seven months after starting the division that we left to form id Software."

Lekovius went litigious. Gamer's Edge had a substantial following, so the Softdisk president's fury was understandable. As a compromise, the newly formed id Software kept the Softdisk team posted regarding

Carmack's technology, and would make games for the company for a year.

While id was busy making 2D games like the *Commander Keen* platformers, Origin was assembling *Ultima Underworld*. *Underworld*'s most revolutionary feature – its realtime 3D visuals – allowed it to be played from a firstperson perspective. It was serendipitous that Romero decided to give Paul Neurath (his ex-colleague and *Underworld*'s lead designer) a call. Neurath told Romero all about texture-mapping, the new technology that allowed artists to paste pictures on to 3D objects, making the virtual space look real. Romero told Carmack about the technique, and after a few seconds of silent contemplation, Carmack said: "Yeah, I can do that."

id made certain compromises to the notion of texture-mapping to boost speed – it removed ceilings and floors, and walls were all at 90° angles – and made its first texture-mapped game, *Catacomb 3D*. But something wasn't gelling. "We'd done *Hovertank* before *Catacomb*," Romero relates, "and that was 3D. You were in a tank. That didn't feel right. Then we did *Catacomb*, and you had the player's hand up there, shooting fireballs. We were like: 'That's better, but not quite there'. And then we thought: 'Let's see if guns do it'."

Guns did it.

Wolfenstein 3D, a game about escaping a Nazi prison, enthralled gamers like nothing else in 1992. It made id Software one of the most prestigious games studios worldwide, and Romero a star. And, thanks to a clever publishing scheme, it made id a lot of money, too. "We had a 50/50 deal with Apogee, our distributors, and we did this awesome pricing structure on the game," Romero enthuses. "For $35, you'd get the first three episodes of *Wolfenstein*. For another $15, you'd get another three episodes, which we called the Nocturnal Missions. And then for another $10, you got the entire strategy guide for the game. And guess what? Ninety-five per cent of the users bought the $60 version of the game."

Swarms of gamers bought the game, but it was just a taste of things to come. Carmack was experimenting with a new graphics engine, one that afforded truly cohesive 3D spaces with angled architecture, differing height levels, and realistic lighting. After turning down 20th Century Fox's offer to use the tech in an Aliens adaptation, id came up with a unique premise: a blend of sci-fi and the biblical. "It was like: 'Yeah, yeah, yeah, you're out in space and you meet aliens'," Romero groans. "Everyone expects that. So we were like: 'What if we

Masters of Doom (from left) John Carmack, Kevin Cloud, Adrian Carmack and John Romero in Mesquite

The leaky chainsaw, nicknamed Eager Beaver, used by Kevin Cloud to create Doom's most notorious weapon

With Carmack and Cloud, showing off id's burgeoning range of promo T-shirts, during the making of Doom II

ROMERO ON...
JOHN CARMACK

"Carmack was cool. You hear on the internet about how robotic he is, and so on, but he's extremely creative. He had this world in his mind – this D&D campaign – which was just amazing. I mean, it blew away anything I'd ever read about D&D. It was like a real world. Carmack was doing freelance games – he did a little tennis action game, and some RPGs – for the Apple II, and got about $450 for each one. He found out the PC games paid almost twice that, so he decided he needed to learn the PC. He rented a PC for one week from a store, and he learned how to code on it. He ported his entire Apple II RPG to the PC, in one week, and submitted it. He could only afford to make it a week, because that's how much money he had to rent it. In seven days, he was a PC programmer. So that's how smart he is."

## ROMERO ON... THE TROUBLE
WITH ION STORM

"We licensed the Quake I engine for Daikatana. I thought we'd get the game done by December 1997, but by Christmas I found out – because of the people we'd hired; I was used to working with a group that knew their shit, you know? – it wasn't gonna happen. People had no idea how the engine worked, and they weren't used to doing anything the way we were doing it. It was a massive education process that slowed everything down. Then when we went to E3 and saw the Quake II demo, it just blew me away how awesome it was. I basically said: 'There is no way I can release my game with the Quake I engine. It's gotta be Quake II.' Unfortunately, I didn't get the engine until February '98."
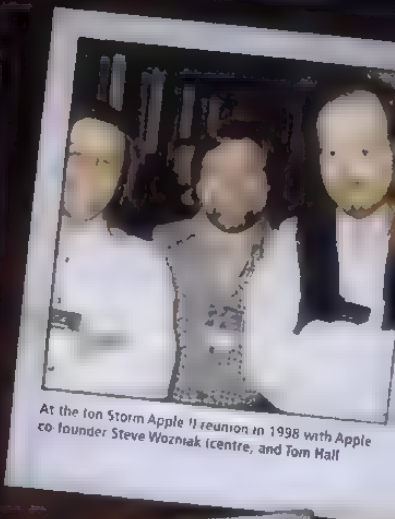
At the Ion Storm Apple II reunion in 1998 with Apple co-founder Steve Wozniak (centre), and Tom Hall

ROMERO ON...
DAIKATANA

"I wanted to make an FPS that was really big. It needed to have a lot of variety in it, and I thought that one of the ways to do that would be to have multiple time periods where everything changed each time. Which meant the style of the time period – all the weapons, story, monsters – changed. The whole game would change – just bam, bam, bam. So we came up with four different time periods, and about six weapons per time period – 24 weapons and lots of monsters. Every enemy was different; they weren't just reskins. As a game? You know, it's got some bugs with the sidekick AI, and some of the graphics aren't so hot, and some of the levels aren't great, but overall, I think it was a neat idea. Had it been executed properly, I think the game would be pretty cool. In fact, there's actually a team working on converting Daikatana to the Source engine now."
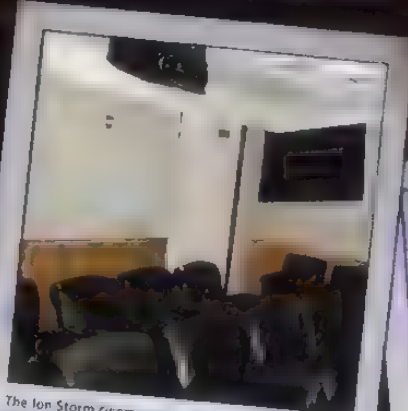
The Ion Storm cinema room, kitted out with leather chairs all round and a $50,000 projector system

The workstation panels that were installed in an attempt to keep out heat from the sun at Ion Storm

At the wheel of a canary yellow Hummer replete with custom-built audiovisual system, circa 1999

ROMERO ON... EARLY FPS TECH

"It was a lot of work creating maps for Doom initially, because of the complexity of the data structures. Basically, we were saving sectors in an array, and walking through that array to do the rendering. And it wasn't fast enough. But you should be able to see the rendered levels. So Carmack was like: 'I've gotta rethink this'. And he read as much stuff back then – all different areas – and came across a white paper about binary space partitions, or BSPs. It was about how to take a model of a character and make it so you don't draw the back of the model – you can do it quickly if you're only drawing the polygons you can see. Carmack translated that to a level, rather than a character model, and when he did that, he worked out how to use BSPs in a game, to make a level move fast. Nobody had ever used BSPs in games before, so he got in contact with the Bell Labs scientist in charge of creating BSP trees. We showed him our application, and he thought it was pretty cool."

Action from Catacomb 3-D, the id game from 1991 often regarded as the founder of the modern FPS
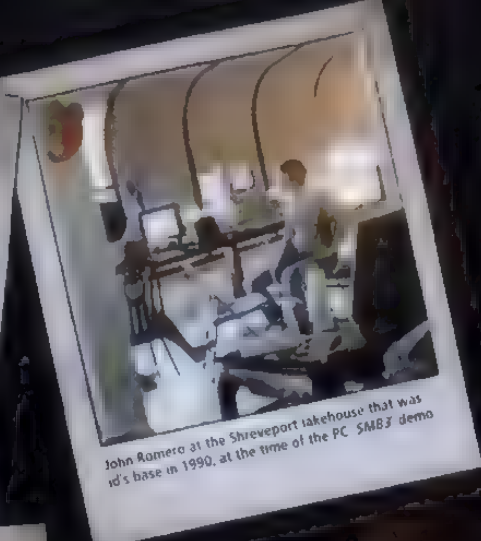
John Romero at the Shreveport lakehouse that was id's base in 1990, at the time of the PC SMB3 demo

ROMERO ON... HIS ORIGINAL QUAKE DESIGN

"I wanted Quake to be violent and unpredictable. I wanted it to be disturbing. Completely different to Doom. So the camera was going to slightly move, so you're never still in the game. We'd never have a still pixel. I wanted to do more with the gameplay, too – I didn't want just Doom-style weapons. I was like: 'We've done Doom. Let's do Quake now. Let's do something else'. So at the beginning, if you were going to engage an enemy in a fight, the camera would pull out to the side – whatever the perpendicular angle was – and show you a sort of fighting-game-style view. And you'd have a lot of tactical stuff you could use. I also wanted different types of triggers. You could make a sound and it would be an alert. We had triggers in Doom where you'd walk over stuff, but in Quake I wanted visual triggers. So if you looked over at an area, it could trigger something. Games don't do that, even today."
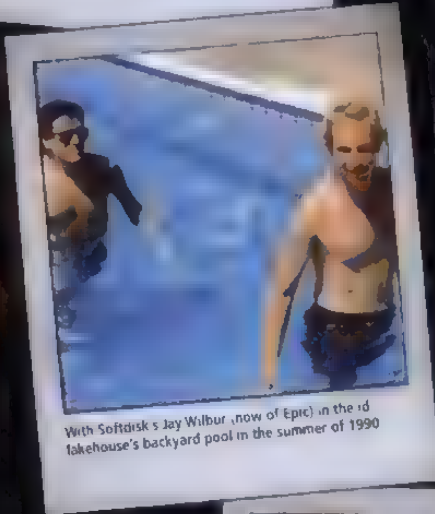

With Softdisk's Jay Wilbur (now of Epic) in the id lakehouse's backyard pool in the summer of 1990

ROMERO ON... STEVIE CASE

"Stevie had moved to Dallas and started a game company. She had a bunch of developers there doing a Quake II add-on called Vengeance, published by GT Interactive. Bobby Prince did all the music for it. But then GT fell down after they'd finished the thing, so they totally went under and it never got published. But then she was hanging out in town with a bunch of friends, and she said something about being able to smack me down in Quake. They asked her: 'You wanna try playing him?' And she was like: 'Uh, yeah!' So they called up my friend Noel, and Noel called me, and told me: 'Some chick says she can smack you down', and I was like: 'Uh, get her in the office right now'. So the first match we had at Ion, I beat her two games to one. She won one game, though, and that was pretty impressive so I put up a web page for her. She wanted a rematch two weeks later, and she beat me two games to one. And then she got famous."

With wife Rhaluka outside of the Slipgate Ironworks offices in San Francisco, 2006

ROMERO ON... OTHER FIRSTPERSON SHOOTERS

"I thought the games that came out after Doom were awesome. One of the biggest reasons why I wanted Raven to make Heretic was because I wanted to play more shooters – not just ours! So when Duke Nukem 3D came out, I couldn't wait to play it. I loved it. I loved it so much I listened to the music for it every day for years afterwards. As for shooters now, I love Valve's games. There's a chance I'll go back to shooters one day. A design I was working on at the end of Daikatana, about a year before Ion Dallas shut down, was a new kind of shooter called Game X. It was basically kind of like Guild Wars in structure, in that you had a common area, but you had instanced levels. It was pretty cool, as a design, so, yeah, I can see myself working on another FPS."
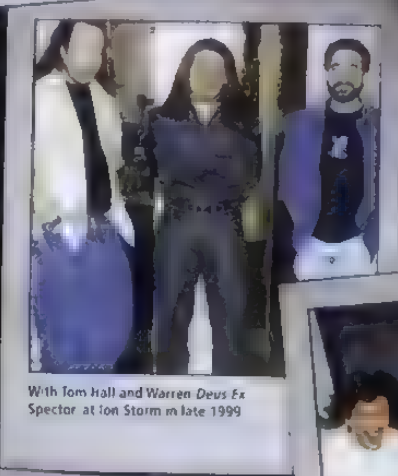
With Tom Hall and Warren Deus Ex Spector at Ion Storm in late 1999

In the id office where Carmack once took a battle axe to a locked door, rocking out with Shawn Green

Wolfenstein 3D, from May 1992. The game eventually found its way on to everything from 3DO to GBA

All photographs © John Romero

ROMERO ON... DOWNSIZING

"I wanted to do handheld and mobile games because the wireless market was heating up. And I was really excited about the PocketPC. Stevie and I wanted to start another company together, because it had always been Tom Hall and I. Oh, and because at Ion Storm, I'd done no programming. Five-and-a-half years of my life, when I was at Ion, there was no programming. I wanted to do 100 per cent, full-time coding. All day, all night. That was one of the big driving factors. Monkeystone was probably the most fun I've had developing in my entire career."

do something different? You know, the future is about progress, and religion and the devil and God and all that is just so backward, so we said, 'What if you go into space and it's true? What if you find Hell? Wouldn't that be crazy?!' They were such opposites."

Gamers took to the juxtaposition with an ardour that eclipsed Wolfenstein's success entirely. When Doom was premiered in December 1993, the demand for the game crashed the FTP server hosting it at the University of Wisconsin. It became a global pop-culture phenomenon. Unsurprisingly, the pressure surrounding the development of id's next property was intense. Romero didn't want to make another Doom sequel – 1994's Doom II was as far as he'd go – so he began working on a radically different design. Its name? Quake. As development commenced and began to plateau, though, Romero's ambitious plan was shelved. Carmack declared a new mandate: rework Doom. Romero was crushed that his company – which always strove to try new things, he says – was turning against him. He decided then that after Quake's completion, he'd leave id Software and form his own studio.

After Quake hit shelves on June 22, 1996, Romero was fired before he could quit.

Unfazed, Romero formed Ion Storm in November that year. In 1997, he relocated Ion to the coveted penthouse of the JPMorgan Chase Tower in Dallas. After being stuck in id's drab offices for the first half of the '90s, Romero wanted something more luxurious, hence the penthouse and Ion's notoriously ostentatious offices. "I just wanted a really nice space to work in," he shrugs. "I was tired of working in an office with grey walls. We had all this money at id, and we had an office that looked like the one next to us. It was ridiculous."

The spending earned Ion significant profile at the time. But public opinion soured as Ion's first release, Dominion, attracted critical scorn. Romero's magnum opus, Daikatana, descended into one of the most infamously protracted development cycles the business has ever known – and when it was finally released in September 2000, its tepid sales and reputation all but put an end to the Ion Dallas offices. Romero's industry cred was in tatters.

Despite the ridicule the press heaped upon Romero, he maintains he isn't to blame for the mess that Ion Storm became. "The biggest mistake I made," he states, "was with the co-founders I had at the beginning, other than Tom Hall. Everything

that happened past that point happened because of that. I can't talk about it, because I had to sign a non-disparagement contract, but those people screwed up so bad. You don't read anything about what really happened at Ion because we're not even allowed to talk about it." He's past caring, but does joke, somewhat disconcertingly: "There's even an Ion Storm survivors group online!"

While Romero was coping with post-Ion fallout, the rest of the world turned its attention back to Doom. Why? At 11:19 am, on April 20, 1999, students Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold entered Columbine High School and murdered 13 students, injured 24

others, and eventually killed themselves. The event came to be known as the Columbine High School Massacre. Both Harris and Klebold were fans of Doom, and had created their own levels for the game. The media frenzy around the event led many observers to vilify Doom and its purported sociopathic message. Unsuccessful lawsuits were filed against id Software and other developers and publishers by parents of several of the victims, and the massacre itself has been arguably the lynchpin of every violence in videogames' debate since.

Romero maintains he was never riled by the blame. With regard to whether violent games can foster violent behaviour, he takes

the obvious stance: "They probably can, if the person who's playing the violent game has something wrong with them. It's like watching Rocky – if you want to come out of the movie theatre and start caving people's faces in, are you gonna blame the film or yourself? If you can't handle it, don't do it."

Despite his apparent indifference to the issue (not to mention Daikatana's failure), Romero knew he needed a change. So he moved into the smaller field of handheld game development, forming Monkeystone Games with Tom Hall and then-girlfriend Stevie Case. This gave him the opportunity to do something he hadn't really done since forming Ion: write code.

But when Romero split with Case – "it ended up pretty bad, and I was pretty depressed for a while" – he decided he had to get out of Dallas. Management seemed too crushing a prospect, so he ended up working for Midway on Gauntlet: Seven Sorrows in Chicago. Due to scheduling issues, however, production had to be restructured and sped up, and Romero was asked to leave. The result, unsurprisingly, wasn't spectacular, and Romero was unfairly blamed in certain quarters for the game's mediocrity, despite his minor involvement with the finished product.

Fortunately, he had someone to ease the burden. A casual internet acquaintance of Romero's since 2001, Raluca Plesca became a source of comfort after his breakup with Case. Soon, they realised they had feelings for each other, and Romero flew to Romania to see her for the first time in 2003. Shortly thereafter, in 2004, they were married. "Normally," Romero jokes, "when you have these internet meetings, you meet the real person, and it's always a letdown. But when I saw her in person it blew away any pictures or anything I could have seen of her. I was amazed."

Now in San Francisco and with new-found resolve, Romero has formed Slipgate Ironworks, the mysterious company that we're led to believe is working on an MMO that will shatter all of our preconceptions about what an MMO can be. Perhaps to avoid comparisons to Daikatana's hype machine, Romero has ordered a complete PR blackout, and admits he's also wary of other companies stealing Slipgate's ideas. His recent switch back to Apple products – he aims to cleanse himself of Windows forever – may indicate, however, that the game won't just appear on PCs. No word on that yet, though, obviously. Still, we hear if you stop bugging him about it, he'll gladly share a few Laminates Drops.

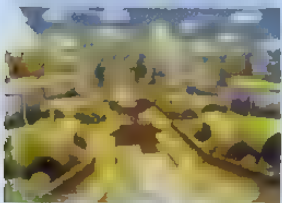# Subscribe to **Edge** and get TWO exclusive T-shirts free

Review

Edge's most played

Race Driver: Grid

It takes a while to adapt to Grid after long sessions with GTAIV's buoyant physics. Fortunately, Codemasters made ploughing into a wall of tyres a reward in itself
360, PS3, CODEMASTERS

Mario Kart Wii

Boozy sofa sessions are no longer Mario Kart staples, we're happy to swap expensive imported lager for apple juice when a game turns out to be this toddler-friendly.
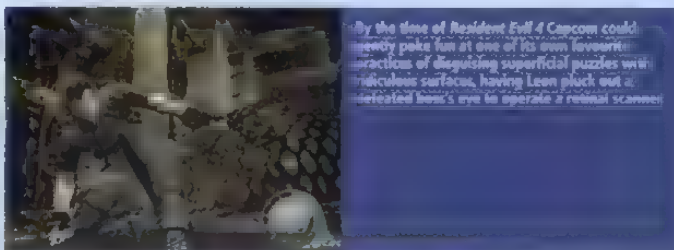WII, NINTENDO

Pac-Man Championship Edition

It's difficult to think of a better 'reimagining' of a classic. Eat the ghosts for early points, or play the long game by going for dots? You're still the king, smiley.
360, BANDAI NAMCO

A puzzling question
Where are the free-range, organic brain teasers?

By the time of Resident Evil 4 Capcom could merrily poke fun at one of its own favourite practices of disguising superficial puzzles with ridiculous surfaces, having Leon pluck out a defeated boss's eye to operate a retinal scanner

Not far into Alone In The Dark, Edward Carnby faces a problem. There's a bus finely poised on the edge of a crevasse, needing only the slightest encouragement to go crashing in, and he has to get to the far end of it. Stepping tentatively inside, it's not initially clear what to do. When it hits you, the solution is not only elegant but also suits the context: it's an excellent puzzle because it uses Carnby's native abilities in a new way, and grows from the game's world

Similarly early in Ninja Gaiden II, Ryu Hayabusa has just dispatched a group of ninjas when he finds a plain door that surely a man with so much weaponry could bash through, but the game demands the use of a keycard. There's no eureka moment here: you just run around the environment for a minute or two and, sure enough, eventually stumble upon a nearby chest that contains the card

Why did Team Ninja choose to include this? What purpose does it serve, beyond forcing the player to explore a largely linear environment one more time? It could be argued that the real puzzle in Ninja Gaiden II is in

working out your enemies, adapting and maximising Ryu's abilities. The card key, in contrast, seems like a relic from older games, something included because.. well, there have always been locked doors in videogames

Resident Evil had plenty, using an intricate key-set to dictate a back-and-forth route around the mansion that made it feel much more like a real place than a linear environment. Equally, the same trick sometimes went too far by forcing significant backtracking in the latter stages. It surely wasn't just coincidence that when Hideki Kamiya, a veteran of that series, later directed Devil May Cry it included lock and key puzzles which sat oddly in Dante's world – which surely, in turn, influenced Ninja Gaiden.

Alone In The Dark deserves plenty of recognition here – the bus example is one of many puzzles that feel fresh. And surely this is the sort of thing that the term 'next generation' is supposed to represent. Cutting away the dead wood, abandoning things that are there simply because they always have been, and, most of all, making the functional work in the name of fun.
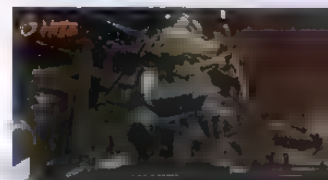
ALONE IN THE DARK

R estless and yet focused, dramatic and yet mundane, ambitious and yet bounded, Alone in The Dark is much like its demonic possessed creatures: both eloquent and ugly. Those moments which subtly framed puzzles encourage experimentation are followed by irritation at the fussy and inconsistent controls.

It certainly starts off with a bang. The first 30 minutes of the game take Carnby from captivity and the threat of execution by a shadowy bunch of occultists to witnessing the whole of Manhattan torn apart with vast fissures before making a precipitous descent through a disintegrating high-rise and a desperate escape through the streets by car. The sequence is notable not only for the way it so assuredly sustains the drama but for the fact that it is almost completely interactive, introducing many skills that Carnby will be using throughout the game: boxing, shooting, jumping, welding and manipulating objects, fighting, putting out fires, climbing, rappelling and driving.

And it is also a high that Eden never quite manages to recreate. More insidiously though, it also introduces the pervading sense that, though Carnby is a jack of all

It's a tragedy that AITD's vehicles don't handle as well as you might expect the developer of Test Drive Unlimited to have managed. They're just not fun

Carnby's inventory, his coat, is elegantly integrated into the flow of play but proves awkward in use. Making space to juggle items for combining is distracting, and a small plot-critical item will annoyingly take up one of the valuable slots. Equipping objects under pressure is often a trial of patience

trades, Eden has failed to make him master of any. The frequent platforming sections are hindered by his lack of connection with surfaces: a foot left floating over an uneven area here, a hand clipping through a edge there. Driving is similarly inexact, with floaty handling that can make traversing the tree strewn and fissure ridden Central Park, the game's central locator, frustrating (confusingly, Eden also created Test Drive Unlimited). So, too, is melee fighting. Sure, Carnby's blows connect meatily with the game's agile and ferocious zombies crumpling under a blow from a lead pipe. But the control system is awfully clunky, with melee weapons and objects swung in arcs ascribed by the right stick, and Carnby and his extended arms tend to obscure t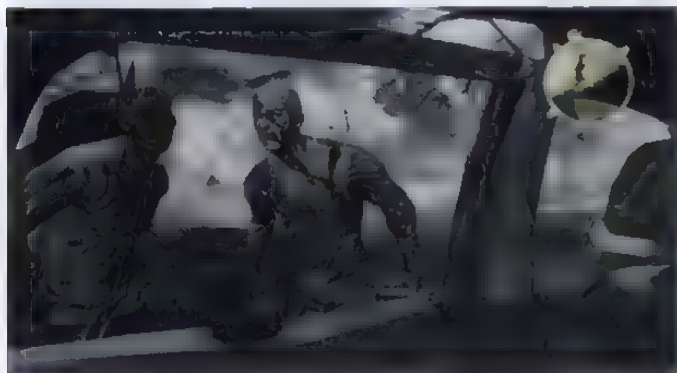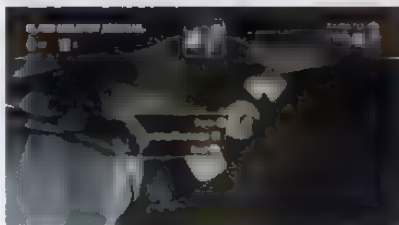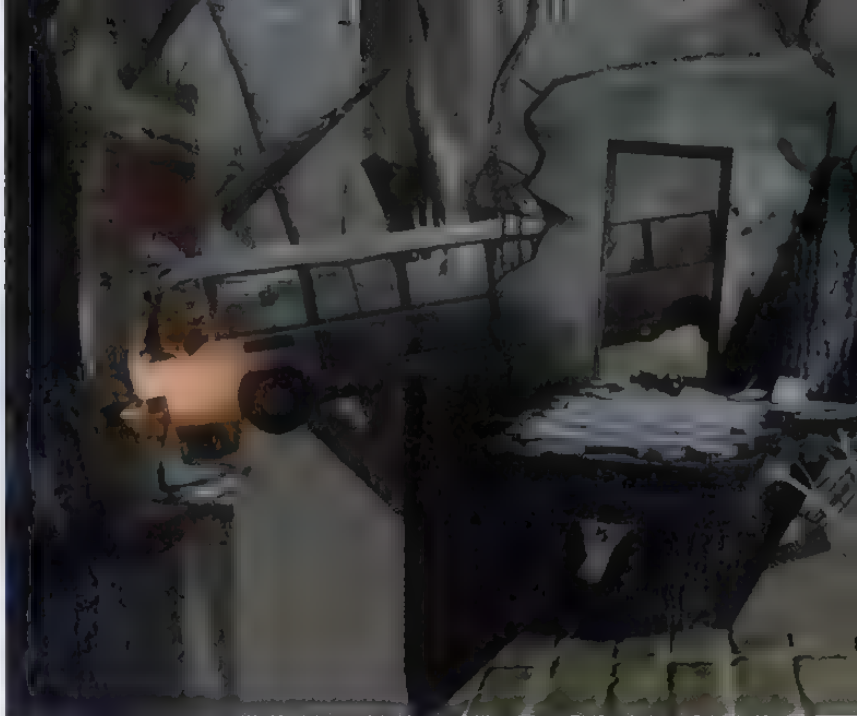argets, making timing strikes and dodges difficult. Aiming, which is conducted in firstperson, has no acceleration, making small adjustments hard to perform, though the reticule will automatically lock-on to certain targets, if not enemies themselves.

Just as Eden has thrown the book at Carnby's abilities, it has also implemented three types of view: firstperson, thirdperson character-relative RE4-style controls and thirdperson camera-relative ones. It can lead
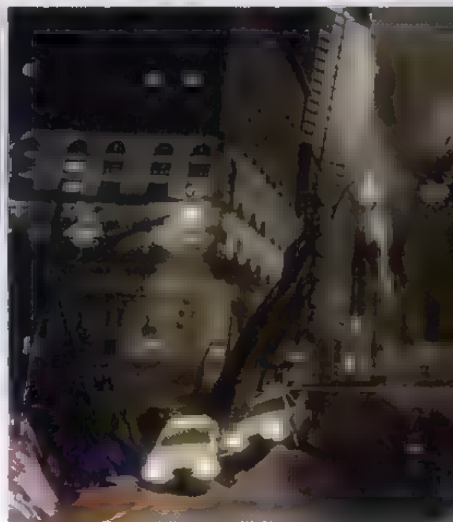
to disorientating flicks between views that see Carnby walking straight back out of the room he's just entered. Though the option to flick to firstperson initially seems generous, it's actually invaluable for exploring the frequently constricted rooms and corridors. Eden has clearly worked hard to streamline all that Carnby can do on to the gamepad but there are inconsistencies, and having one context-sensitive button, which switches on the torch, opens doors, picks up, activates switches, starts cars and much else besides, can lead to a frustrating lack of adaptability.

Where Alone In The Dark is much more successful is in its puzzles, which are naturalistically embedded in the scenarios and environments. Redistributing weight on a bus that's delicately poised over a crevasse hooking out a cable that's electrifying a pool of water, creating sticky Molotov timebombs to blow up inaccessible obstacles such

Carnby's blows connect meatily, with the game's agile and ferocious zombies crumpling under a blow from a lead pipe

It's usually possible to simply run past zombies in the park, but they're still extremely unnerving. They will cluster around your car if they've heard you, leap on to its bonnet and give chase with close, bestial pants
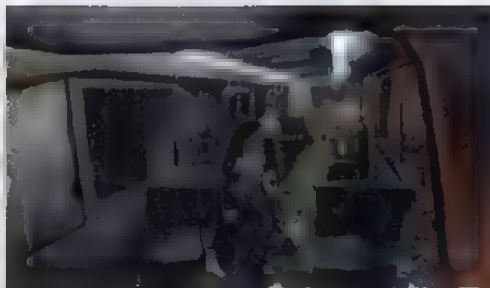
Hotwiring is necessary to activate circuits and car ignitions, performed by carefully moving the wires together. Later finding the right wires is necessary – contact the wrong ones in a car and you'll set off the horn or the lights and risk attracting the attention of the many roaming enemies
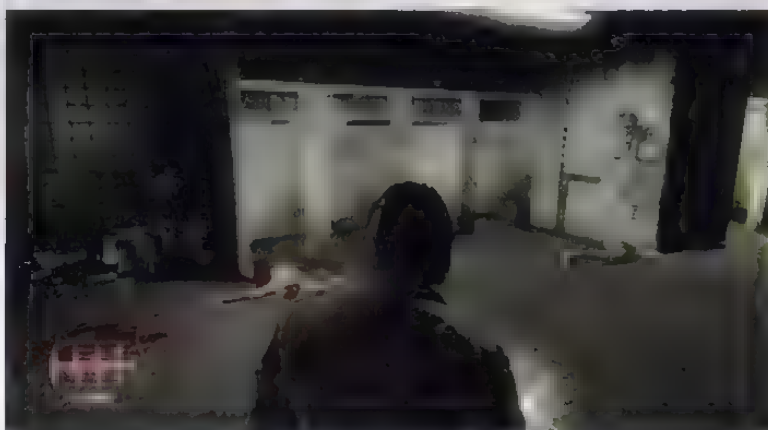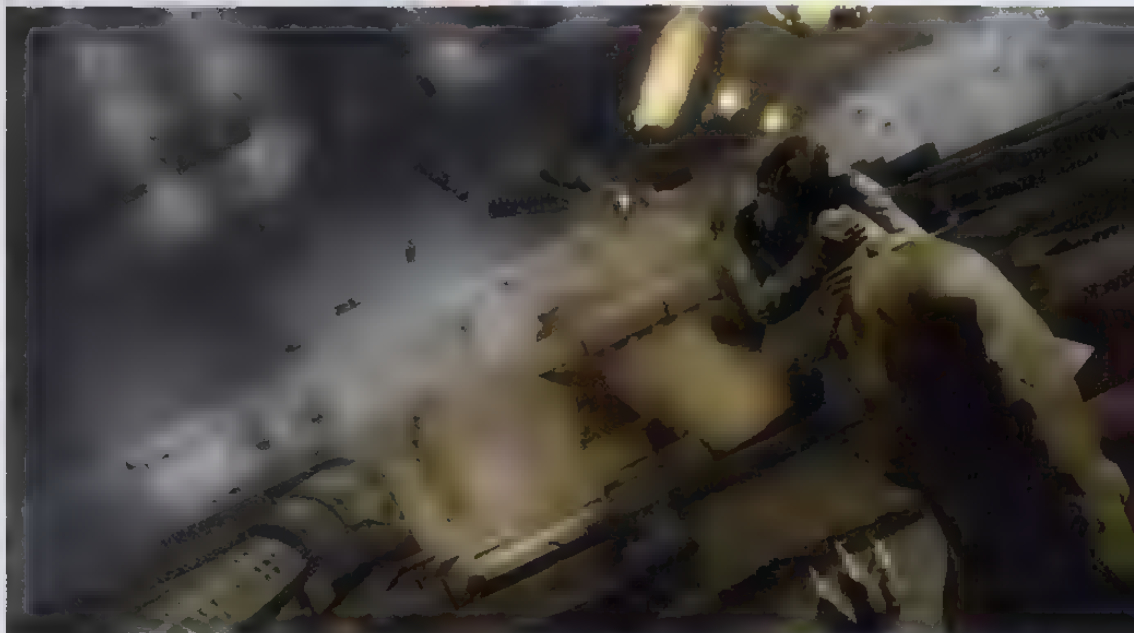
AITD excels in the pacing and dramatic framing of Carnby's story. The sense of scale is often awesome, and the action flows smoothly between each set-piece

The game conveys the results of sudden apocalypse effectively with every location littered with bodies. Carnby's body displays wounds that must be sprayed back to health. More serious ones require bandaging before a time limit runs out

Wandering free

Though Central Park is suitably eerie, in practice it's actually a rather featureless landscape of trees and benches between points of genuine interest. The oppressive atmosphere and monotone lighting do little to encourage exploration and aimless play in such an environment, but it does provide a good way to link story-critical locations, lending Carnby's journey through the game consistency and a sense of choice. It all falls foul, then, when Eden ends up enforcing what amounts to the equivalent of *Wind Waker*'s treasure hunt towards the end of the game, a tactic that feels like an attempt to justify all the open space that most players would otherwise have ignored.

sections subtly teach the capabilities of Carnby's inventory and stand in contrast to a couple of forced 'kill all the zombies all and I'll let you through' demands from NPCs

The variety of tools available to Carnby leads to a rewarding sense of mudding through with whatever's to hand. Techniques for burning zombies – the only way to finish them off – abound. Some are better than others: flame bullets (created with flammable liquid) aren't bad, but the aerosol and lighter flamethrower is easily the most efficient. Combining, which is performed in realtime, can be awkward: items must be selected in the right order for the game to register the combination. And despite the variety, some capabilities – piercing blood packs to attract enemies, blowing up a car by shooting its fuel tank and igniting the petrol trail – are rather underused as well as being fiddly to execute, meaning easier options

such as bullets and the ingredients for sticky bombs proliferate intact. Item management in general is a grim comedy: Carnby's coat has limited space, leading to much shuffling back and forth to dump and pick up.

To top it all, despite the TV serial-style presentation, the story never really finds its feet. The game is driven instead by the pacing of its ingeniously rendered set pieces. The dialogue, meanwhile, is clumsy and dumb. Carnby is a likeably conflicted character communicated through past profanity rather than deeper interaction.

And yet *Alone In The Dark* retains compulsive coherence despite all its missteps and contradictions. The breadth of Eden's ambitions may have meant that there's barely a feature that's implemented more than satisfactorily, but there's a generosity of vision here that few games can boast. In an ideal world, perhaps its sturdy core of pacing, puzzles and spectacle could have experienced another year of polishing. Then *Alone In The Dark* could have been something very special. Instead, we're left with what feels like the rough cut. **[7]**

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BATTLEFIELD: BAD COMPANY

DEVELOPER: DICE PREVIOUSLY IN E1?7/E1?7

At some point during development Bad Company's singleplayer underwent that mysterious process of alchemy which transforms promise into faint disappointment. It's not that Bad Company is ever anything less than competent – but there are expectations for DICE to deliver something a little special. Many of those elements which first advertised the game's potential remain, but are undercut or slightly scaled back. the Frostbite engine winches back the horizons of the mass-combat series, but then funnels your passage between them with linearity. Its world is enriched by colourful characters and a politically irreverent sense of humour drawn from such sources as Three Kings and Kelly's Heroes – but this ultimately adds little to the moment-to-moment action. Environments are largely destructible but, not being physics-enabled, they are unpredictably so – seemingly fragile bits of cover inexplicably resisting the force of a grenade while others evaporate. Then there are a handful of design decisions that, while never ruining the singleplayer campaign continuously remind you of what else it could have been.

Previous attempts to append the genre with singleplayer have often come off as mere preparation for the online offering.

Because dying in singleplayer is only punished by a long walk, you can risk your life to pick up an item, die, and then respawn with that weapon or tool ready

Your AI team aren't much good as gunners - often you'll have to stop a vehicle and switch positions in order to take down enemies effectively. For some reason, each time you switch to the gun it seems to be pointing precisely the wrong way

This time, it's down to your surrounding squadmates to uphold a narrative which sets the singleplayer apart from Battlefield's traditional offering. They are mostly successful, a disposable force of likeable delinquents, tossed into the US army's sin-bin to face situations deemed too dangerous for more valuable units. Clichés though they are Sweetwater, Haggart and Sarge are perfectly acceptable companions for your gold-lusting AWOL romp through fictional ex-Soviet Union countries.

Sadly, the nickname for this collection of degenerates, Bad Company, begins to make much more sense in terms of their combat abilities. There's no command interface to direct their efforts – they potter about nearby, shooting in the vague direction of enemies and blithely voiding your attempts to quietly flank an enemy position. Invincible though they are, they never feel like a fighting force. There's many an irksome moment when you wish Haggart, the nominal demolitions expert, would actually

> The dastardly Russians' aim is unerring, zeroing in the second you peek out of cover, even when a forest obscures them from your view
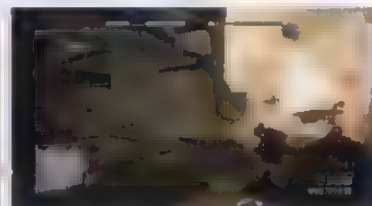
do his job and take down an attack chopper, or blow the tracks off a tank – allowing you to support him in another role. Meanwhile the dastardly Russians will seek shelter in buildings, evade your fire and flank you. Their aim is unerring, zeroing in the second you peek out of cover, even when a forest obscures them from your view. Given the Reds' almost supernatural levels of competency, it's a jarring decision to make your allies so wholly ineffectual.

DICE has salted the wound with an over-generous health system – but even though this prevents the game from being impossibly hard, its execution ends up introducing problems of its own (see 'Bad medicine'). In a similar attempt to allay difficulty, DICE has opted for instant respawns, with the battle persisting between deaths rather than

The health system can create some bizarre situations: on normal difficulty, you can survive the continuous bombardment of a helicopter gunship almost indefinitely – your health lasting just long enough for the syringe to recharge and allow you to pop the bar back up to full (above right). Useful though this undoubtedly is, it feels absurd
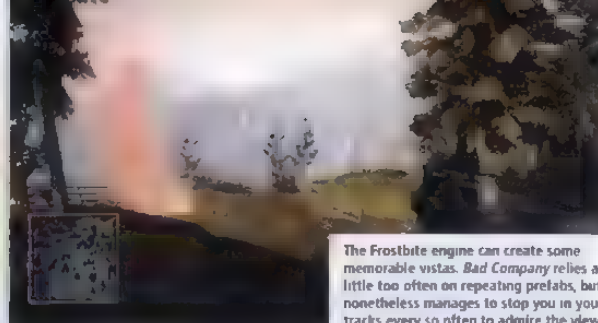
The Frostbite engine can create some memorable vistas. Bad Company relies a little too often on repeating prefabs, but nonetheless manages to stop you in your tracks every so often to admire the view

Bad medicine

DICE's solution to your enemies' accuracy is to overcompensate with the health system. Health is given a numeric value, as in shooters of old, but allows you to boost it back up to 100 per cent by plunging a syringe into your chest. You can do this an unlimited number of times, although it takes a few seconds before it can be used again. The problem is, at later stages, every shot you trade with the enemy leaves you with significantly decreased health, so you find yourself switching to the syringe every time you return to cover. Automatic though this action becomes, it seems like a repetitive fiddle that could have been solved with recharging health.

Despite earlier claims that you could ignore orders and go anywhere you like, Bad Company proves to be fairly linear – the corridor is just much wider. Step outside the prescribed area and you will get shelled to pieces

reverting to an earlier checkpoint. Those you killed remain dead, and you restart a distance away from the fight with the same amount of ammunition you had when you died. It's an adventurous, if odd, compromise that is inconsistently implemented, sometimes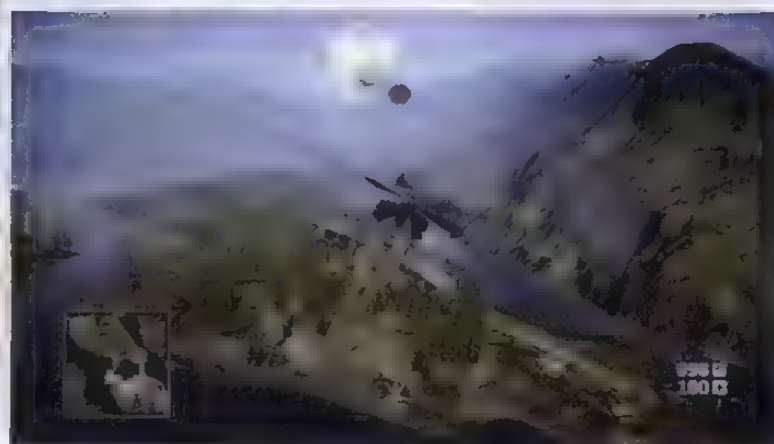 leaving you miles from the battle without ammunition or transport. Both these systems act slightly differently and make a good deal more sense in multiplayer – which, for all DICE's efforts, still remains the series' core competency.

Here the singleplayer mix-and-match of tools and weapons is dropped in favour of a class system similar to that of previous Battlefield games – and, just as with those games, it's an intelligently balanced and pacey experience. Syringes take longer to boost your health and are available only to certain classes, but the kitbags through which class is defined can be swapped for those of fallen soldiers. This latter point reduces the occasional annoyance of needing to traverse open ground with only short-range weapons at your disposal but, given the variation of geography each

map contains, the specialisation of each class can often feel as if it's limiting, rather than empowering, the player.

The ability to spawn in to your squad's location helps to cut down long journey times, but also leads to alarming moments when a one-on-one battle is harshly tipped in one side's favour by the sudden materialisation of an ally with a full health bar. These oddities aside, Bad Company's multiplayer happily checks off the expectations the series has created. Vehicle handling is smooth and controllable, going for accessibility over realism in spite of the developer's determinedly unconventional button configuration. Maps are varied experiences, both in their settings and the speed of play they encourage. Online, DICE has created an experience that's a fine successor to the franchise – and much of the singleplayer's awkwardness can be explained by indecision over which elements of multiplayer should be included. Ultimately, given the decision not to go for straight bot-match, DICE might have been wise to make a clean break between the two **[7]**
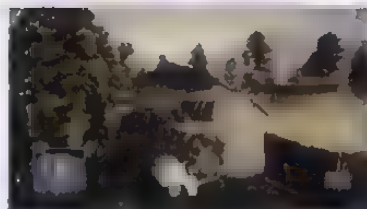
As you might expect, Bad Company gives you plenty of toys – airstrikes are a joy, giving you control over the ordnance as it plunges to the ground. Artillery barrages are also effective at reducing enemies' cover

NINJA GAIDEN II

The videogame ever-presents of 'Game Over' and 'Continue?' pretty much sum up both sides of Ninja Gaiden II – and your instinctive response to the latter will say a lot about how much you'll enjoy it. While playing this game, you will die an awful lot. More than hundreds of times. If you're going to play it on hard possibly thousands. The game will eventually teach you how to not die, but it'll take a huge investment of time.

You won't mind. Because Ninja Gaiden II's core is an almost perfect realisation of its concept – its combat system tuned to a fine balance of attack and defence. Its enemies aggressive and wary of your cheap tricks. Its plentiful weapons differentiated to extremes. The fighting engine is quite without equal in the genre, to the extent that it makes DMC4 feel like a wasted opportunity and God Of

Ryu still has Ninpo magic, in four different varieties, which can save your skin in a tight spot – particularly when enemies begin to overwhelm you

> The fighting engine is quite without equal in the genre, to the extent that it makes DMC4 feel like a wasted opportunity

War an over-bloated spectacle. It's fast It is vicious, it looks fantastic, and it's very rewarding to master.

Ryu's seven weapons all have their particular strengths and significantly different effects on your movement. Rather than this

There's a significant amount of ranged combat in the game (although only the bow, of your four distance weapons, can be aimed manually), and on higher difficulties it becomes teeth-grindingly, and almost unforgivably, difficult to get a shot in

meaning scythes are slow and swords fast it's more about how each weapon can be used in the midst of a group. Whirling the Lunar Staff, for example, will hit enemies in a 180° arc in front of you, but leaves your back exposed, whereas the Kusari-gama (a scythe and a weight connected by a chain) will cause serious damage to anything in the vicinity when whirled around, but requires some skilful positioning and smaller hits to be wound up and unleashed effectively.

The weapons and their variations may be impressive, but the enemies are more than worthy of them. While their moves are learned relatively quickly, there is no fixed pattern to how, where or when they will use their abilities – and each one requires a different countermeasure. This makes

combat sound like a super-quick variant of rock/paper/scissors, and that's not altogether inaccurate, but the early levels are really about teaching you to work independently of enemies rather than responding to them. Your first encounter is with four ninjas, which is as simple as NGII gets; your second with eight; your third with eight in an enclosed space, and so on. It's not a progression that's entirely about numbers so much as forcing the player to learn about the enemies and environments: how the former manoeuvre in differently sized groups, how injury affects their actions, and how the latter change the priorities for Ryu's movement.

This aspect of NGII will be much overlooked. It is one of the hardest mainstream videogames available, and it's too easy for first-timers to die in the first battle. But beyond that the game takes great care to introduce the committed player to the complexities of its combat system gradually. By the end of the first level – a long and highly varied series of fights that flits from wooden huts to skyscrapers via metal walkways and courtyards – you've fought the three basic types of ninja in combinations of both size and variety, and are fully prepared to move through the next 13 levels of brilliant and bizarre foes. You'll still die lots, of course, but patience and some thought about how to circumvent a foe's abilities will always win out.

There's lots of variation in both the enemies and environments throughout. From the common-or-garden sword and claw ninjas all the way up to fireball-spewing

The combo meter is ever-present, although slightly cheapened by the 'Ultimate Technique' which, as ever, allows you to unleash a flurry of blows without very much trouble
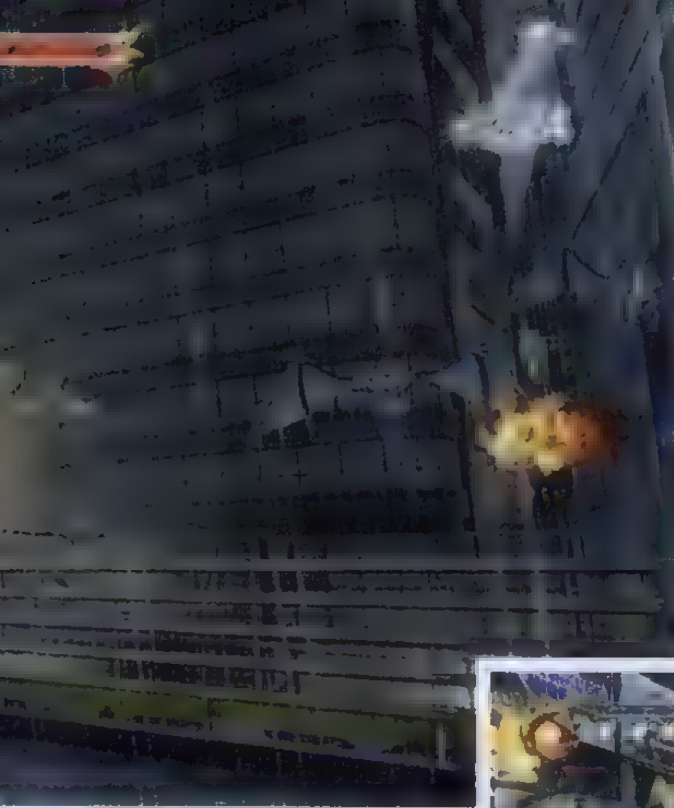
The limb removal adds a tactical element to proceedings, making enemies desperate despite missing the odd arm or other limbs (below), this lot still try to bite your legs off

The counter-attack (above) is easily the most important technique to master early on: not only does it look good, but it frequently removes a limb as well as removing you from a group of enemies – if you just stand still blocking, you're meat

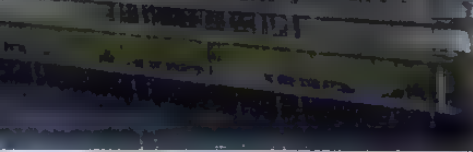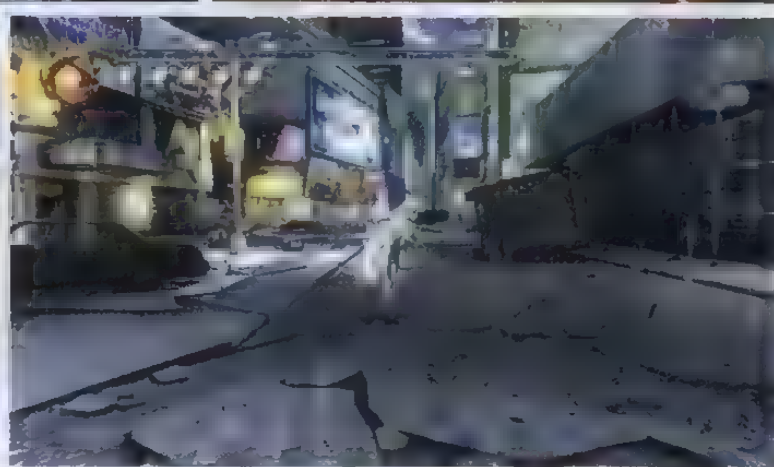The lighting effects are beautiful throughout, particularly in a thunderstorm-struck New York (above left). There's a bit of slowdown in later sections where huge numbers of foes turn up – a technical failing, but actually quite welcome in such small doses, allowing you to admire the beautiful animation of Ryu and co

dragons, bludgeoning hulks and scorpion-like warriors with glaives for hands – no enemy is a pushover and very few even tempt comparison with each other (the cycloptic drones, eight feet tall with a cannon for one arm and a chainsaw for the other, are a particular highlight). The levels move from feudal castles to fetid swamps, from the top of skyscrapers down to the depths of the underworld, and somehow manage to hang together as a world – albeit a ridiculous one – rather than a directionless grab-bag. Only one green underground tunnel shows a lack of imagination and an abundance of PS2-style textures.

The best fighting game ever, then? No, because the brilliantly realised combat is let down by poor implementation of basic features. The camera lamented in our last look at the game isn't improved: it often loses sight of Ryu, gets stuck behind walls, obscures enemies and very occasionally goes into a frenzy of flicking back and forth. There are blind spots in the game, particularly on slopes and around poles, where the combat system seems to be unable to function

tightly. There are pointless puzzles involving door cards and stone tablets. There's one boss moment involving an explosion that's unfathomably bad design. And, really, let's not get started on the narrative.

Taken as a whole these issues obviously add up, but it's important to emphasise that they never wholly detract from the greatness of the combat. Rightly or wrongly they're part of the experience – there are ever ways to fight that negate the camera's worst habits. None of the excuses a fundamental fault in design, of course – and one for which Team Ninja, well versed in the Ninja Gaiden franchise, really has no excuse.

To end on a negative note would be to do the game a disservice, however. Ninja Gaiden II is a fascinating and hugely replayable game that shows Team Ninja has a gift beyond the vast majority of developers in the genre. And it shows something wider in terms of mainstream videogames, and for all that Microsoft needs the support and attach rates of so-called 'hardcore' gamers, the truth is that hardcore gamers need Microsoft more. Much more [8]

The game has a replay feature in the form of the 'Ninja Cinema', but it's the very definition of half-baked and smacks of a last-minute addition. Much more welcome is a grainy 'Old Film' filter in the options menu

ROBERT LUDLUM'S THE BOURNE CONSPIRACY
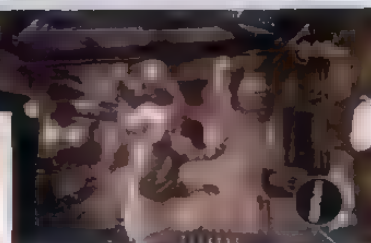
We got a bump coming up

One driving sequence provides a welcome change of pace from the game's usual plod, your heavily branded Mini taking to the Parisian streets to escape the police. You're given a certain amount of freedom in choosing your route through the busy streets, and, most importantly, Bourne's special ability – being able to slow time for a few seconds – allows you to pull off spectacular manoeuvres to leave your pursuers flailing. This, along with the ability to scatter obstacles, somewhat mitigates the limited handling of your car, the inept collisions, the poor AI of your pursuers, and a few cheap tricks that are pulled on the way through. But only just.

There's something worse about playing an average game than a bad one. At least with a bad game you're often given a few (unintended) laughs and some anecdotes to share in the pub. With The Bourne Conspiracy, on the other hand, you're constantly wishing that it was half as good as its cinematic presentation seems to suggest it could be, tempted by the promise it shows of something better, led on by a belief it will improve, and ultimately left with little but the knowledge that it's a missed opportunity.

On a superficial level, the game makes an impact: it's visually neat and the varied environments are full of bits and bobs that Bourne can smash his enemies with, or into. Allied to this, the camera is an accomplished stab at importing the films' supple cinematography, with frequent cutaways and close-ups of the melee combat particularly highlights. This is also the flipside of The Bourne Conspiracy's biggest problem, however, which is the desire to be cinematic beyond the breaking point of interactive entertainment.

The vast majority of interactions in the game, beyond the standard hand-to-hand combat and gunplay, are single button presses that trigger a spectacular move on Bourne's part. These can be violent 'takedowns' on your enemies, or simply contextual jumps and clambers, but they share the characteristic that as soon as the button's pressed, your involvement with the game's over for the next few seconds. It is, at times, like Dragon's Lair. It wouldn't be such a problem to have these moments so frequently punctuating your progress if it wasn't for the fact that Bourne proves rather sluggish and uninspiring the rest of the time: you go from a death-defying leap across rooftops to being unable to get past a suitcase or other piece of knee-high debris, often within the same sequence, exacerbating the strict linearity of your route.

It's not just Bourne's route-finding that shatters the game's slick illusion. The hand-to-hand combat system is awfully shallow,

Bourne's outfit changes with the levels – a small touch that nevertheless helps to build narrative progression – while each location offers individual flashes of character. In combat, the only side-effect of fighting more than one opponent (top) is another QTE, which comes into play frequently and proves as boring as any of the others

and lacking in either challenge or fun. Allied to that, your enemies are indistinguishable in their tactics, and fighting more than one at a time makes no difference barring the odd signposted QTE. Boss encounters meanwhile, are absolute slogs, with human foes happily taking 50 bullets in the face before going hand-to-hand and surviving ten or so takedowns. Gunplay fares marginally better, but although it takes its influences from just about any cover shooter you might pick it doesn't do anything new. Worse than that, it doesn't really even reach the minimum standard players have come to expect by now: your reticule is horribly fiddly on headshots, enemy intelligence is basic at best, and none of the weapons have any real sense of oomph about them.

Dialogue is fairly well written as far as it goes, and the game is capable of offering up some hugely atmospheric moments (some of Bourne's exchanges with Conklin are more than worthy of the source material). But the story in general is so scrunched together as to be almost nonsensical, ill-advisedly jamming narrative flashbacks into the spaces between an extremely simplified version of the books' events. Considering such emphasis is placed on presentation in the rest of the game, it's a notable failing, and the cursory nature of the ending will surprise even the most forgiving player.

The Bourne Conspiracy is a wasted opportunity, a game that heads down a blind alley and abandons its improvisational promises for the easy option of QTEs. Among its many failings one stands out as cardinal and, despite the slick presentation, simply can't be forgiven: you never really feel in control of what's going on.

[4]

Tension is occasionally introduced by a timer, but even on the harder difficulty settings it allows just a little too much time to ever be truly panic-inducing. Other sections, meanwhile, have much of their tension removed thanks to their implementation as QTEs (above right)

The RPG checklist of magic armour, expensive mounts and weird pets has been meticulously detailed by the Norwegian development team

AGE OF CONAN: HYBORIAN ADVENTURES

FORMAT: PC RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: FUNCOM DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE
PREVIOUSLY IN: E151, E164, E177, E184

A ge Of Conan seems to have pulled off a miraculous last minute recovery. The long, uneven development process culminated in a troubling beta test for the MMO, one that seem to threaten a bugged, poorly optimised game. Now live, however, the game is suddenly leaner, stronger and more stable. Funcom seems to have caught up in the massively multiplayer race, and can now climb on to the podium behind World Of WarCraft and Lord Of The Rings Online

Although clearly not leading the MMOG pack at the moment, Age Of Conan nevertheless delivers some fresh ideas and does so with a world that is imbued with lashings of muscular myth-making from Robert E Howard's epic Conan novels. It can be a genuinely beautiful world for those gamers playing on a high-spec PC, and the gritty bloody realistic theme is an unusual and oddly encouraging direction for an MMOG to take

The much-discussed action slant to the combat provides us with rather more

dynamic systems than those usually associated with the damage over-time MMO model. Completing the right set of key presses after activating a power will determine if the killing blow is dealt, and getting chains of these combos right is vital to defeating powerful enemies. Likewise the spread of powers – from being able to transform into a nightmarish demon, through climbing and sneaking to less esoteric magic use – tries hard not to conform entirely to our expectations. This is a double-edged sword, of course, and Conan often ends up feeling undefined and unclear. WarCraft's clear-cut classes might lack originality, but they make up for it in absolute clarity. Conan's parade of identical, identity-free treasures do nothing to encourage the kind of character crafting and loot hoarding that makes these kinds of games so compulsive.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of Age Of Conan is, perversely, what it takes from single-player games. Interactions with NPCs are delivered through dialogue trees with animated, voice-acted sequences. These make no practical difference to the quest gathering grind of the overall experience, but do add some colour to the world. What's rather more impressive is the use of instancing to create an ongoing personal adventure during the first 20 levels of the game. This over-arching plot gives players something to aim for, as well as enabling Funcom to make use of more potent, personalised storytelling elements than we're otherwise familiar with in MMOs

If there's a major problem with Age Of Conan it's that we're too comfortable with its routines. It's not a radical enough

The quest structures cater well to solo play, occasional groupings and the rather more organised guild-based outings of multiple players

Creating beautiful women and muscular meatheads has never been made quite so easy. There's even a slider for thigh width, which will no doubt cater to someone's special fetish

development of the fantasy RPG for anyone to feel inspired or challenged. Later developments in player versus player warfare might offer interesting experiences – but there are vast tracts of all-too-familiar kill and fetch activities to complete before that even becomes a possibility.

Age Of Conan has, happily, started out in its journey in a far better state than many other MMOs that have appeared in the past three years, but it nevertheless lacks the genuine desire for change that the genre so desperately needs. In many ways Funcom has played it safe and simply aped what has worked before. That seems to be OK by the 400,000 people who signed up in the opening week, but it still feels like a wasted opportunity to strike out in a fresh direction. Blizzard's success still looms over everything that's going on here, and that just can't be healthy

[7]

Team fortress

As well as providing the MMO hardcore with a splendidly ominous-sounding array of high-level dungeons to trawl and retrawl, the Conan endgame allows guilds to construct first villages, and then entire fortresses, which must be defended from marauding PvP hordes. Fortresses should provide reasons to feel invested in the gameworld, especially as they provide benefits for the guild as a whole. The scope of this large-scale resource-plundering game mode should provide long-term gamers with a decent reason to stick around and play a strategic, competitive game once the quest-trees are exhausted. It's not exactly the alliance game of Eve Online, but it is certainly a fertile basis for future expansions of the game.
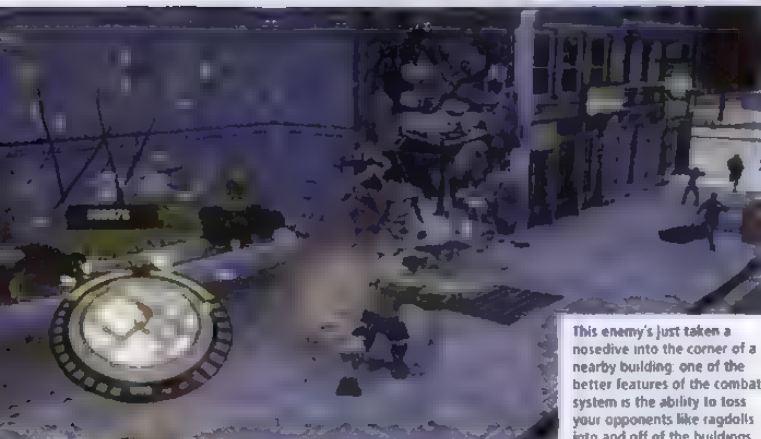

Dialogue trees give characters far more depth than in many other MMOs, even if the result is always having another quest added to your log

A counter tots up the damage you cause while wandering through the city – if you're too conspicuous, the army comes out to stop you. But they're no match for the Hulk

This enemy's just taken a nosedive into the corner of a nearby building: one of the better features of the combat system is the ability to toss your opponents like ragdolls into and off of the buildings

The city has its splashes of colour, but outside of these it's depressingly formulaic at times, and the backtracking (Hulk can use, oddly enough, subway stations, but has to find them first) quickly ruins the illusion it initially casts

THE INCREDIBLE HULK: THE OFFICIAL VIDEOGAME

FORMAT: 360 (VERSION TESTED), PS3 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: SEGA DEVELOPER: EDGE OF REALITY

The Amazing Spider-Man

Possibly inspired by Tobey Maguire's turns in the *Spider-Man* games, Edward Norton now has the dubious honour of giving the worst in-game performance from a decent actor in recent years. The story, such as it is, is delivered mainly through audio diaries and phone conversations featuring Banner, and Norton's flat deadpan delivery simply comes across as uninterested. Every line sounds phoned in and, given that these sections are the only chance the game has to give the Hulk any psychological complexity, prove a major detriment to the overall package.

The Hulk is a little misunderstood. Part Frankenstein's monster, part golem and part Mr Hyde, he doesn't sit easily in the superhero mould. He's a character born from repression and anxiety that's capable of the most violent and uncaring acts in the Marvel universe, and above all else a split personality: Bruce Banner, conscientious scientist, and Hulk, amoral monster.

The Incredible Hulk: The Official Videogame chooses to ignore this duality in favour of concentrating on Banner and his internal struggles with the monster. Not really. This is essentially a reimagining of *The Incredible Hulk: Ultimate Destruction* made with the benefit of having played a lot of *Crackdown*, and concentrates entirely on smashing things. And as far as this goes, it's not too bad: the Hulk character model is a triumph, a highly detailed mass of rippling green muscle that powers his way through streets and objects, and effortlessly scales structures with huge one-handed jumps.

The early appeal of the game is entirely focused on these abilities, and there are few artificial limits placed on them: you're free to pick up an innocent pedestrian, dole out a few whacks, and throw them hundreds of feet from the top of a nearby building. You can pick up a bus and hurl it into a petrol station, or simply sprint through the New

York traffic, scattering debris and pedestrians in your unstoppable wake.

But after a while, simply picking things up and tossing them around grows a little stale and the missions bring little variety to the table: move here, bash baddies, run here, bash baddies, throw this here, bash baddies, carry this, bash baddies. It might seem an unfair comparison for a movie licence, but *Hulk* constantly brings to mind *Grand Theft Auto IV* simply because of the open-world New York setting. And when put next to the robust detail of Rockstar's magnum opus *Hulk*'s attempt at building a playground falls slightly flat. It's not that the city needs a huge amount of nooks and crannies – after all you're usually running through it at a rate of knots – but there's simply not that much variety. Rows of shops use the same skins, there is a disproportionately huge number of yellow cabs in the traffic, the pedestrians and their soundbites begin repeating all too quickly, and parks are almost featureless.

Alongside this, the world is full of technical problems: the draw distances are extremely poor, and accompanied by some particularly jarring pop-in. The camera can be confusing, especially when you're bouncing Hulk through the streets (the fastest way to travel), often losing sight of him completely. The environment is also disappointingly low-res next to the Hulk

himself, particularly bad examples being billboards, trees and vehicles.

It's easy to forgive a lot of this when the thrill of simply tearing through it all is new, but after a few hours it begins to become tiresome. It will certainly make you dream of what might have been, but after a few hours its lack of variation, poor technical accomplishments and above all its deadening mission repetition make for a hulking disappointment. **[4]**

Spot the difference. Close-up, the city can look quite something. Get a little higher, and it all blends into a coffee-coloured haze of shapes as the 'fog' comes down

While graphically Ferrari Challenge is adequately detailed, the audio feels sorely underdeveloped. Wet races are a welcome and challenging addition – and those players whose bravado decreed that they remove all driving aids will no doubt rue their decision after the first precarious corner. Still there is an option to sheepishly re-attach the stabilisers mid-race

FERRARI CHALLENGE
TROFEO PIRELLI

FORMAT: DS, PS2, PS3 (VERSION TESTED), WII RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: SYSTEM 3 DEVELOPER: EUTECHNYX

If ever there were a candidate to fill the position left when Roman Catholicism ceased to be Italy's state religion, then Ferrari would be it. Italy lives and breathes Ferrari. It's a struggle to contain such fervour within a single territory. Sega's Yu Suzuki is almost certainly afflicted with scarlet fever, first evident in OutRun and with Ferrari F355 Challenge his most obviously symptomatic production. Now System 3's Mark Cale has produced his own tribute, both to the history of the scuderia and Suzuki's own travails – Ferrari Challenge boasts a remarkable catalogue of wedge-shaped supercars and a large selection of licensed circuits on which to exercise them.

Cale's objective, as was Suzuki's before him, is a simulation in which seasoned wheelmen and rank novices can rub shoulders, and indeed wing mirrors, on the same stretch of asphalt. Ferrari Challenge boasts one of the most flexible driving models in the genre, and driving aids are not just available, but can be applied in varying strengths depending on the nuances of the player's ability. This solid foundation of convincing handling is married to visuals that

boast a confident sensation of speed, even with 16 competitors on track, and AI that performs a suitably selfish pastiche of blocking and line defence.

Unfortunately, while the core racing is sound, the periphery is far less stable. Ferrari Challenge leaves much to be desired in both structure and presentation. Lingering pans across the clean lines of an F430 utterly fail to distract from an unintuitive, poorly divided menu system. There's simply no reason why the access to the insignificant Team page, which merely offers the option to change its name and its nationality, should appear alongside the cardinal menu options and require a separate loading screen, particularly when the singleplayer list is so saturated with modes. Equally, while there are three F430 Challenge championships, each a satisfying chunk of play, they are entirely discrete – the clumsy need to purchase a car once it's unlocked lends little coherence between seasons or feeling of progress on to more potent machinery. Worse, some of the additional modes, such as the prey-balanced 360 GT, are aching for the exposure that a more fulsome career mode might have

provided. A Forza-inspired livery editor for every vehicle in the game, online or off, goes some way towards redeeming the otherwise slight selection of off-track activities.

The most heinous of Ferrari Challenge's crimes, however, is the aural reproduction of otherwise pedantically recreated vehicles. No doubt one of the reasons magnates and tycoons amass huge collections of Ferraris is the symphony of engine notes they produce and while there's certainly variety between models here, they are all equally uninspiring. Worse, driving from anything but the cockpit camera mutes the engine noise even further, often leaving only the forgettable music for accompaniment. In a title designed to capture the spirit of the marque, it's a surprise to see this facet so neglected.

In the wake of Race Driver Grid, some of the raw passion that Ferrari Challenge so yearns to engender in its audience appears to have deserted it. But while it is a far less polished game than Codemasters' juggernaut, it's by no means a charmless effort either. In spite of its commitment to a single brand, Ferrari Challenge is rich in content for those prepared to navigate its obtuse structure, and no doubt refugees from Grid's conscious shift away from driving simulation will find solace taming this selection of prancing horses. [7]
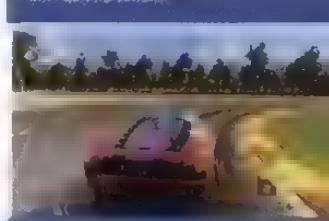

The online mode allows for custom-painted Ferraris of any model to be taken into 16-player races. Currently these are only single races, but Eutechnyx has promised more modes as part of free downloadable content

Many will assume that the signature model, the F430, is the most incendiary of the cars available, but there are some far more powerful racers to be unlocked

Driving lessons

Ferrari Challenge includes a tutorial to ease first-time drivers into what is a reasonably sophisticated handling model. While there's nothing like the breadth of Gran Turismo's licence tests, new drivers are talked through a lap of Ferrari's Fiorano test track by ex-racing driver and television presenter Tiff Needell. His realtime advice is a neat touch, but ultimately just offers superficial nudges to accelerate and brake rather than detailed lessons on technique. The tutorial can be revisited to refine performances, but few will feel compelled to practice for top marks

97

Partly thanks to the character models borrowed from the Cube's *Crystal Chronicles*, *MLAAK* has plenty of nice touches. Especially charming is the way buildings sprout in a vortex of wood and plaster

Quest success largely depends on assigning the right citizen to the right job. For all the cloned character models it's surprising to see how attached you grow to certain subjects. The successful ones, anyway
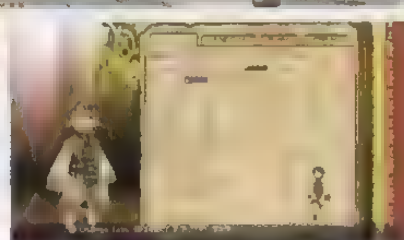
The actions available to you may be limited, but there's a comprehensive selection of stats to work out how they play out. There's a lot of depth here, for those who want it

The world map offers hints of which adventurers are best suited to its landmarks. Hidden passages are bets uncovered by thieves, while you soon learn which mages should face off against which beasties

FINAL FANTASY CRYSTAL CHRONICLES: MY LIFE AS A KING

Building placement is limited to fixed plots of land, but trying to arrange citizens near key buildings is challenge enough. Living in close proximity to certain structures will see your citizens lean towards particular character classes. Ensuring that all adventurers are situated near a stat-boosting building of some kind forms the meat of your spatial concerns. As for non-adventurers? They, like us, just need a nearby bakery to keep them happy

F inal Fantasy has always acted rather liberally with the term 'job' Far from the daily grind of most employment, job classes in Square's universe dictate little more than what form of adventurer you'll take. The job title may read 'black mage', but the cheques are made out to 'hero' Not so in My Life As A King, the only honest day's work in Final Fantasy's life

The aim? To rebuild a now-desolate kingdom. Where normally this is the impetus to saddle up and venture forth, leaving the quest issuer eating your dust, it is now you munching on this earthy farewell Pitched as a city management sim, the geographical angle you would expect – the wise placement of infrastructure – makes way for a citizen-centric approach City growth is the aim, but this cannot be achieved without adventurers to harvest resources from the surrounding lands
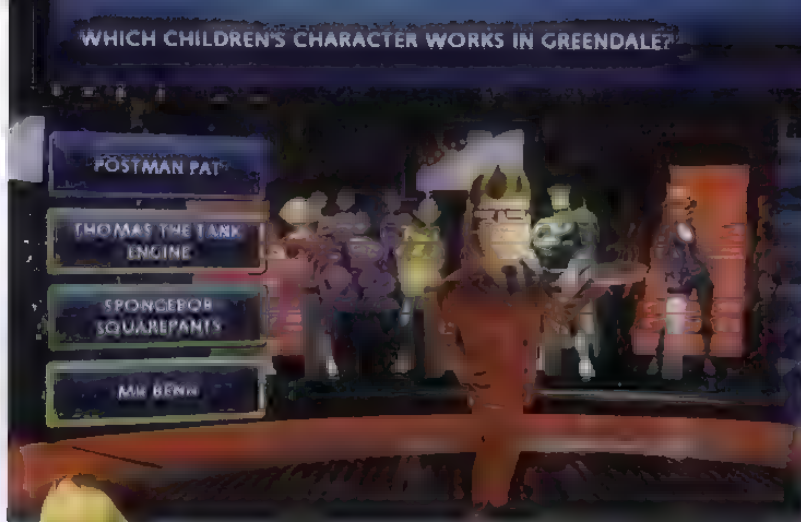
As such, much of the game is built on a simple manpower conundrum Building requires 'elementite', which can only be

collected by citizens, who need the benefits of new buildings to succeed Maintaining this adventurer assembly line is your core concern Where in traditional management games the threat is that of total meltdown, here your only concern is a stalling of the story Narrative hurdles cleverly disguise clear city objectives – build X structure, explore Y location – but some will feel disappointed at being so clearly shepherded along
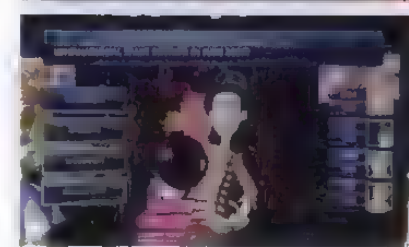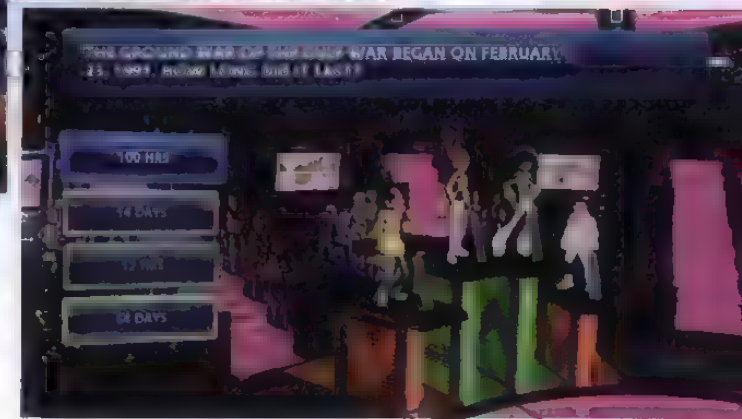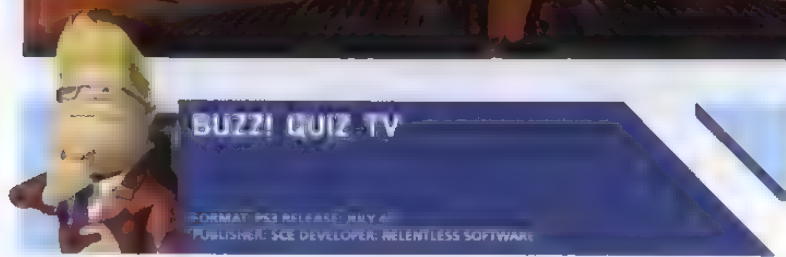
That said, that your actions as ruler have a clear impact on the city is certainly a novel experience No number of pie charts declaring the success of a *SimCity* metropolis can match the pride of watching a newly commissioned warrior go about making the most of the resources you've carefully laid on for them There's a terrific immediacy to the events, too. The days are short enough to guarantee a constant hustle and bustle, and the results of the previous day's adventuring are cunningly given after the save screen, drawing you in to the next day before you realise it

There's an artfulness, too, to the issue of DLC Far from the stinginess of most offerings, My Life As A King is plagued by an overabundance of extra quests and buildings While there is a solid 15 hours of content in the original download, you can't help but see the deliberate trimming of features to fuel further purchases – especially considering so much of it is available from day one That original 1,500 points soon adds up to the price of a full title, the full depth of the game denied from the outset

There is also the rather cynical application of the franchise to mask this commerce, particularly threatening to the younger player Faced with three moogles, they ask for 'points' (remember, kids it's not real money) in exchange for further adventures The game's narrative hand-holding may annoy those looking for the freedom to manage their city, but it is only when it begins to lead us towards our wallets that we really take offence. **[7]**

POSTMAN PAT

THOMAS THE TANK ENGINE

SPONGEBOB SQUAREPANTS

MR BENN

THE GROUND WAR OF THE GULF WAR BEGAN ON FEBRUARY 23, 1991. HOW LONG DID IT LAST?

100 HRS

14 DAYS

12 HRS

01 DAYS

The TV studio setup and multiple types have changed little - Pass The Bomb will be familiar to even the most casual of Buzz! players - but the ability to play online adds a new flavor to familiar games

BUZZ! QUIZ TV

FORMAT: PS3 RELEASE: JULY 4
PUBLISHER: SCE DEVELOPER: RELENTLESS SOFTWARE

It's easy to forget, perched on a Balance Board and furiously waving a Wii Remote, that Sony dallied with casual gaming a year before Nintendo through SingStar in 2004 and Buzz! in 2005. Games for non-gamers, a market that didn't yet officially exist. Whether it's Sony's confidence in its creation or a case of not fixing something that isn't broken, this PS3 rebirth for the quiz series arrives, at first glance, almost unchanged. Delve deeper, however, and you'll discover online play and user-created questions – changes that could raise Buzz! from occasional party novelty to ongoing community-driven experience.

Structurally, it's identical to previous PS2 instalments. You and up to three friends test trivia skills using bespoke (and now wireless) buzzers. The TV show presentation returns, as does the perennially irritating host, whose last-gen design and Muppet-like flapping now looks clumsy and awkward against a suite of beautifully modelled and animated contestants who add much-needed charm. Rounds take a variety of forms; you might

Buzz! is more user-friendly than ever through the use of channels to filter out specific genres. A great help now that user generated quizzes are set to boost the ample repertoire

ARTS & LITERATURE

GEOGRAPHY

HISTORY

NATURAL WORLD

OTHER O-

have to provide correct answers, win points based on reaction time or bet existing points to win more.

If little has changed, it's still hard to resist the initial appeal. Even the most cynical player is drawn in as rivalries flourish, driven by fluctuating scores. Rounds like Pass The Bomb – where you must answer correctly to pass on an Acme-style explosive before detonation – or a pie-flinging event on your race competitive spirits. However, it's a short-lived diversion. Presentation and game-types remain constant, with only question content varying, so two or three games will see all but the most rampant trivia appetites satisfied for the evening. There's also the frustration of a point-stealing round, a Mario Kart-style reversal that kicks in near the end of a game and sees everyone ganging up on the leader, stripping them of their points and rendering any hard-won lead pointless.

It's through the internet, however, that Buzz! refreshes its familiar format; strengths and weaknesses aside. As with Burnout and SingStar integration is seamless – there's no

discernible difference between on- and offline functionality. Sofa Vs Sofa mode enables you to enter online multiplayer as if your competitors were in the room. It does raise the question of integrity, though. During a match we played, our rivals took quite some time answering certain questions. About as long as it might take to Google the answers, say. Trust issues aside, everything is so well implemented that it's easy to see less tech-savvy players embracing it fearlessly.

Also well executed is the ability to generate your own questions at MyBuzz.com although adding questions through the game itself. Using a simple editor it's possible to create text-based quizzes on anything. Our testing saw a predominance of gaming content, but beyond demographics the only limit is imagination, though we're still not sure if the 'What's on my desk?' challenge demonstrated comic genius or a thorough lack of creativity. The eight-question limit seems restrictive until you realise it's tailored to fit the in-game rounds. These home-grown efforts may lack multimedia components like photos and videos but they're as available and playable to everyone as any of the developer's content. What this means for Buzz! Quiz TV depends on the community it fosters. Which is to say Buzz!'s future is in the hands of the masses. **[7]**

It's a shame, given the vibrant and lively quiz avatars you control, that Buzz himself sticks to the limited design 'flip-top head and zany' behaviour of the PS2 instalments

I'll have a 'P' please, Bob

The potential to abuse user-generated content in Buzz!: Quiz TV must be a concern for Sony. Through the website players can create questions about anyone and anything. It's liberating in terms of potential, but nobody wants to walk in on little Johnny scoring highly in 'The life and loves of Ron Jeremy'. Fortunately, custom-created quizzes can be flagged as 'mature', and Buzz! then enables such content to be blocked from younger eyes. Quizzes can also be reported, both on the website and through the game itself, ensuring that dubious subject matter should be easy to regulate. It's also simple to keep track of user-created material through the MyBuzz! news page, which lists the most popular quizzes according to player feedback, as well as recent additions and prolific quiz masters.

SBK08 SUPERBIKE WORLD CHAMPIONSHIP

O ften obsolescence within a genre is a gradual, creeping process that plays out over years as developers explore the limitations of their platform. Occasionally, though, the bar is raised in a single defining moment, outside of the prescribed transition between generation shifts. SBK08 suffers, at least to some degree, from a release within a month of the bombastic and beautiful Race Driver: Grid – the long shadows cast by Codemasters electrifying racer undoubtedly encompass two wheeled contenders as well. As a result, this simulation of the Superbike World Championship has, in the space of a single month, gone from being forgettably bland to strikingly so.

While the riders and their machines are suitably fettled, each of SBK08's locales is a regionally themed interpretation of barren tundra varying from the endless high-dynamic-range dreamscape of the Losail circuit to a seemingly unfinished Phillip Island. Thick forests are replaced with flat, papercraft textures, and bustling paddocks become a meagre smattering of angular architecture. The unrealistically vivid colours and addition of detail-scrubbing motion-blur only serve to highlight the simplicity of the scaffolding beneath.

The actual business of beating the tarmac is functional but resolutely unremarkable. The handling has certainly been tightened up since the previous generation, but the continued refusal to simulate high-side accidents suggests there are still major blind

The Superbike World Championship may be based on production cycles as opposed to MotoGP's more powerful ones, but this is no excuse for the tepid on-track exchanges and workmanlike pace

spots in the reproduction of motorcycle dynamics. The main omission, though, is the inherent thrill of leaning inches from the floor and winding on the power – sparse environments mean there's little sensation of speed, resulting in an inert and ultimately unsatisfying racing experience. Even elbow-to-elbow in the pack of 22 riders, there's little of the swashbuckling thrust and parry such an exposed position and ferocious specification should inspire; it's only in the rain-saturated outings, where the bike squirms and writhes under both acceleration and braking, that any feeling of connection to the spectacle is forged.

Scant motivation, then, to plough through a championship that is a bare-minimum sequence of qualifying and race sessions, and while online play provides more convincing competition with only eight riders supported the circuit will appear as underpopulated as the scenery. Ultimately, SBK08's undercooked engine leaves it failing to maintain pace with last year's MotoGP '07, let alone Codemasters four-wheeled firebrand. **[5]**

Some of the circuits are so stripped of character that they are barely recognisable. Any atmosphere on the 'brolly-dolly'-decorated grid sequence evaporates as soon as wheels are turned in anger.

BEIJING 2008
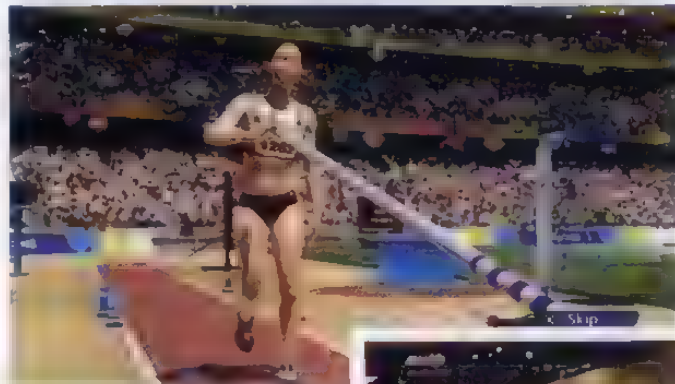
T here's a loudmouth minority of partisan console owners who deride Nintendo's software catalogue for its prevalence of button-mashing minigame collections, but even they would have to agree that the genre is well served by the controls of the DS and Wii hardware. It's something that can't really be said for Xbox 360, PS3 or PC, as Beijing 2008 demonstrates. The glossy, convex face buttons of the 360 pad, for example, are not meant for mashing, nor its springy triggers well suited to rapid depressions, nor its analogue sticks designed for violent circular waggling.

These issues are made more obvious by the moderately high level of challenge at which some of the events are pitched – something that you might think unwise in a collection of minigames, albeit one given the po-faced veneer of a serious sporting event. In total contrast to the hugely accessible and unashamedly mindless New International Track & Field (see E190), Beijing 2008's events aren't always easy to master, and many use completely different control schemes from each other. This adds welcome variety, but inevitably makes the game

The dev team has lavished attention on the stadium, its Olympians and their movements – but for all its accuracy, it feels a little sterile. More crucially, this realism means the game lacks the ability to exaggerate enough for clear feedback

less intuitive, particularly considering that the minigames do not always translate directly to the particular skills each event requires – a fact at odds with the dedication towards realism in the game's presentation.

To its credit, Beijing 2008 includes sports that many athletically oriented minigame collections shy away from - karate, canoeing and cycling. These are realised with more imagination than the simple hammering of buttons, but sadly aren't any more entertaining, karate, in particular, is made oddly vague by its delayed QTE feedback. There is sometimes a virtue in keeping things simple. Track & Field and its ilk have few pretensions beyond being disposable and frantic multiplayer diversions, Beijing 2008 has made its events marginally more taxing, but no more joyful. **[5]**
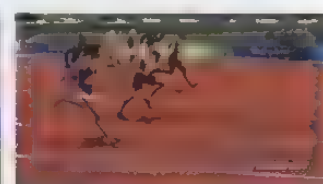
To mix things up, even button-mashing sprints require a tense minigame while you wait for the starting gun

DON KING PRESENTS PRIZEFIGHTER

H opes were high for this one. Venom, developer of the decent enough Rocky games, a wealth of documentary footage from boxing legends (and Don King), and the promise of a career mode more complete than any seen thus far. There was even, in good old boxing tradition, a bit of lip aimed at the competition by the game's producer Fight Night Round 3 is apparently "mostly just beautiful, and that's about it"

So, the tale of the tape. The documentary footage is diverting enough, but doesn't present a coherent story – often simply hinting at events which the game doesn't fill in, such as the early rivalry with Jesus Silva. The career mode is lightweight: pick your next fight, then choose whether to play two minigames to boost your stats, or sacrifice one for a media engagement which gives you more fans, and hence more adrenaline, when you're in the ring.

It's here that Prizefighter falls flat. The in-ring fighting has problems that are simply fundamental for a boxing

There's no real 'speculosity' (as King would say) in the peripheral features, but the training minigames are pleasant enough, if uninspired

game. Never mind the sluggish movement, repetitive phrases from trainers, or ability to trap the AI in combination patterns at the most basic level, Prizefighter has suspicious collision detection and a great many gloves that clip through arms and heads. Given that a boxing game's focus should be getting the confluence of two upper bodies right before all else, it's unforgivably lax, and renders pointless any of the video footage or other dressing around it. How does it measure up against the best of the division? Don King Presents Prizefighter is mostly below average, and that's about it.   **[4]**
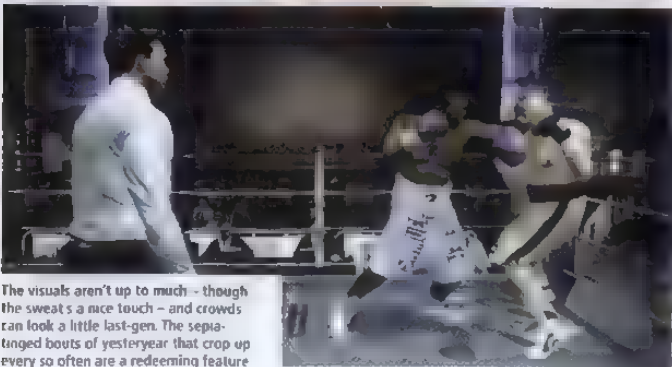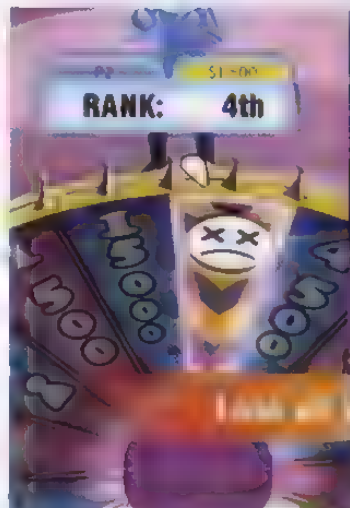

The visuals aren't up to much – though the sweat's a nice touch – and crowds can look a little last-gen. The sepia-tinged bouts of yesteryear that crop up every so often are a redeeming feature

TV SHOW KING

The singleplayer mode – a challenge to correctly answer as many questions in a row as possible – has little real attraction other than giving you the opportunity to memorise the full roster

O f all the genres, the quiz game is surely the easiest to design, with rules ready-prototyped by countless TV shows. Relentless, with Buzz!, certainly makes it look simple, but that's until you play Gameloft's TV Show King, which appears to have ignored much of the wisdom Relentless has done so well to learn from and develop.

Its main innovation is a by-product of the fact that it must rely on the Wii Remote, which displays the pointers of all human players clearly on the screen as they make their selection from the four possible answers to each question. As a result, you can see what your three competitors have chosen and change your answer accordingly within the time limit, though the player who gets the correct answer first wins the most points. It's an elegant

Since it's a WiiWare title, TV Show King lacks bespoke buzzers, meaning that a fourplayer game requires four Wii Remotes to play, a number that surely few households possess

workaround that can generate enjoyably heated arguments about copycat tactics. But it's pretty much the only reliable source of competitive banter. Gameloft's attempt to add chance to proceedings by having the option to spin a wheel of fortune at the end of each round does less to balance out player skill levels than to arbitrarily dole out penalties and awards, though the chance to steal points from other players can afford occasional vicious pleasures.

While it includes a good deal of questions with some reasonably well pitched difficulty levels, TV Show King's key problem is the fact that each round is identical: answering five questions for points. There's nothing like Buzz!'s Pass The Bomb or Offloader rounds to add variety and pace, and the host's rather abrupt voiceover does little to distract from the repetitive rhythm of the questions. Along with the slick but nondescript design of the sets and host, with surrogate charm lent by the use of your own Miis for avatars, TV Show King is just too flimsy and capricious to distract a group of players for long.   **[5]**

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EDITION

NORTH EAST UK

You may already know about game studio clusters in Guildford, Brighton and Leamington, but some are still surprised that the north east of England is a major force in the game development scene. Over the last two and a half years, business has grown by 35 per cent, with the region now making up ten per cent of the UK videogame industry. An eclectic mix of small independent studios and global big boys share the multiplying business parks of Newcastle, Sunderland and Middlesbrough, reaping the rewards of several supportive and well-resourced regional development initiatives.

There is also a strong (perhaps even unique) interplay between academia and the development community. Middlesbrough's Teesside University was an early instigator of game-specific education, adding computer game programming to its curriculum way back in 1998. Now, the area's three largest higher education establishments feed dozens of graduates into the game industry every year, relying on local developers for feedback on course content and to ensure relevance for an ever-evolving industry.

What really characterises the area, though, is the sense of community and cooperation that exists between the region's key businesses.

Everyone is passionate about the north east and its possibilities, and if this passion and confidence is yet to really show up in the modern videogame content coming out of the region, there are enough interesting projects on the go to ensure that development reputation is about to catch up with regional pride. Which is why we took the short flight north to meet the key players and work out just what makes such a distinctive community tick.

BREAKING WITH TRADITION

The wider world may be just discovering the north east as a centre for digital business, but game development has been there for 25 years...

For many, the north east still prompts images of traditional industry – of smoke-spewing factories, of quaysides lined with shipping yards and warehouses. It was here, after all, on a walk between Redcar and Hartlepool, that Ridley Scott spied the looming steelworks that would inspire his Blade Runner skyline.

But the years of manufacturing, mining and shipping are long gone. Now, the area is reinventing itself as a vibrant digital hub, a supercluster of cutting-edge media, science and technology companies drawn in by massive urban regeneration and the presence of three tech-focused universities. Regional development agency One NorthEast has been at the forefront of this push since 1999, instigating a range of funds and development programmes to both attract high-tech businesses

into the area and develop local talent. The IT sector in the region employs around 37,500 people and contributes approximately £2.4 billion per year to the local economy. Digital business is booming.

The videogame industry got here over 15 years before One NorthEast. The Facus brothers, Middlesbrough's answer to the Oliver Twins, released their first title in 1983, a Dragon 32 graphical adventure named Castle Of Doom. In the same year the publishing house Tynesoft set up operations, spewing out sports sims and daft TV tie-ins throughout the '80s. One employee, **Brian Jobling**, went on to form Zeppelin Games, which later became Eutechnyx, the area's major independent studio today. Martin Edmonson founded Reflections in 1984, originally a BBC Micro specialist, the company is much better known today for Shadow

Of The Beast, early PS1 hit Destruction Derby and of course, the Driver series.

From the mid-90s, the region became something of a driving game production line. Reflections had Driver and Stuntman, Eutechnyx pumped out sims and licensed racers and, in 1996, staff from both studios left to set up Pitbull Syndicate, which worked on several titles in the Test Drive series as well as LA Rush. In 2005, the studio was bought by Midway, and is now finishing driving shooter Wheelman. It's not the only global publishing presence in the region after a somewhat problematic period working with Atari, Reflections is now owned by Ubisoft and, having completed the lightweight tester project Emergency Heroes, is now starting on the next Driver title. Over in Gateshead is Venom Games, the Take-Two studio formed from the ashes of Rage Software

However, while game developers have been flying the flag for digital creativity in the region for 25 years, the concept of a benign, purposeful community is comparatively new – and owes much to modern regional development initiatives. Set up in 2003,

"GameHorizon runs several conferences each year, the most recent of which attracted speakers such as Mark Rein and chief XNA architect Chris Satchell."

Codeworks is a centre for digital innovation, funded by One NorthEast, which seeks to support and develop digital media technology companies in the north east. A key element of the operation is GameHorizon, which specifically works with game developers in the area, arranging visits from key publishers, developing placement schemes for

graduates and getting studios out to big events like GDC and Leipzig.

But perhaps GameHorizon's biggest achievement is encouraging local studios to actually talk to each other. "They all saw each other as competitors,"

reflects head of sector development **Carri Cunliffe**. "Only two of the companies were really speaking – Mere Mortals and Eutechnyx. They all knew of each other, but they weren't sharing ideas, there was no cross-pollination. If you look at areas where there's a successful industry, there tends to be collaboration, sharing of knowledge as well as strong publicity.

So Cunliffe went out and talked to other networks, to Tiga, to Yorkshire's Games Republic and to the now defunct Scottish Games Alliance. "I found that it was important to get the companies together to get them talking, but also to keep the network fresh and alive by organising events and inviting publishers from outside the region to come along." Hence, GameHorizon now runs several conferences each year, the most recent of which attracted guest speakers such as Charles Cecil, Mark Rein and Chris Satchell, Microsoft's chief XNA architect. Slowly but surely, the message of this region's reinvention is slipping out into the wider industry consciousness.

Naturally, the area has more to offer than a growing digital economy. Newcastle is, after all, the self-proclaimed party capital of the UK, and most of the studios we've visited seem to be making the most
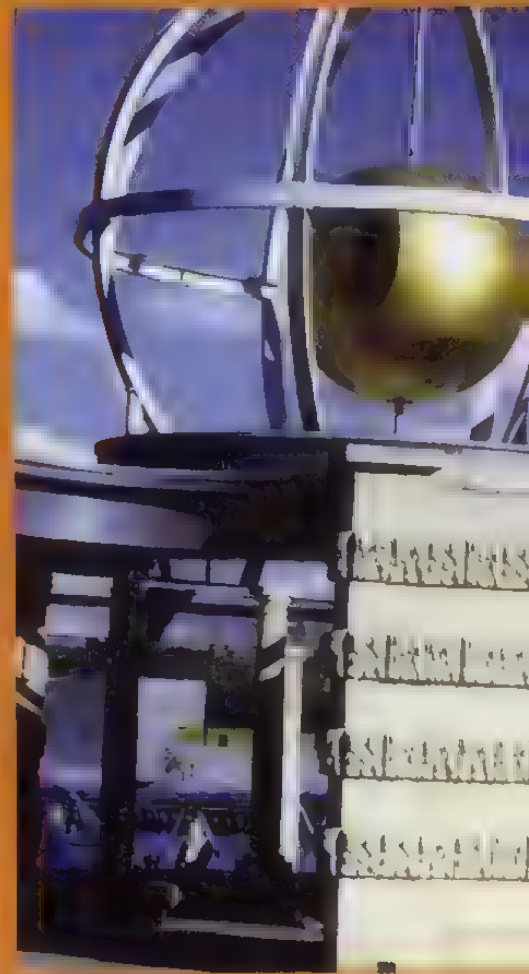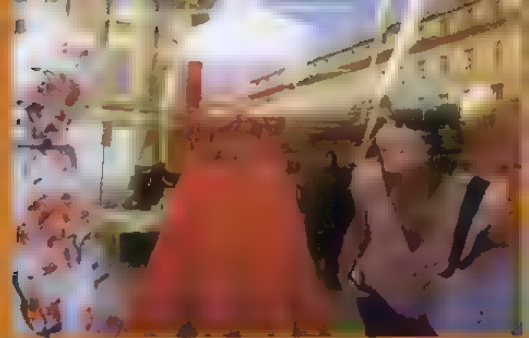
of that reputation. The area has come on a long way since the old days of beer-sodden armies chasing drinks promotions from one sticky-floored joint to another. Although those attractions remain abundantly available – just head to the Bigg Market area – the Central Station area and famously regenerated quayside offer a diverse range of welcoming boozers, cool bars, cutting-edge clubs and upmarket restaurants.

Popolos is pretty neat cocktail bar, offering great mojitos and friendly staff," suggests Midway Newcastle producer **Joe Neate**. "The Head Of Steam pub, close to the train station, has a good selection of fine ales and an eclectic clientele. Then there's the Cluny – just outside the centre of town in the Ouseburn Valley. It's a beautiful location, there are

tables outside for the summer, and loads of live bands. Awesome Cluny burgers as well."

Elsewhere, Middlesbrough resident Darren Falcus recommends Yarm, a picturesque town on the river Tees, packed with traditional pubs and stylish eateries,

most with gardens overlooking the water. Prince Harry drank here while visiting RAF Leeming, and Middlesbrough FC's players are regular visitors – but don't let any of that put you off. Sunderland boasts a healthy live music scene, thanks in part to the success of local outfit, the Futureheads.

Those seeking cultural attractions are well catered for. Indeed, over £200m has been pumped into the region's cultural infrastructure over the last ten years, with Newcastle's iconic Baltic and Sage centres proving key recipients. The Middlesbrough Institute of

The two words that cropped up time and again whenever we asked local game studios about the north east dev scene were 'vibrancy' and 'passion'

Modern Art and Sunderland's Northern Gallery for Contemporary Art complete the area's trio of world-class exhibition spaces, while the recently reopened Tyneside Cinema is a refreshing riposte to multiplex culture, with a broad remit of foreign language movies and cult classics alongside Hollywood fare.
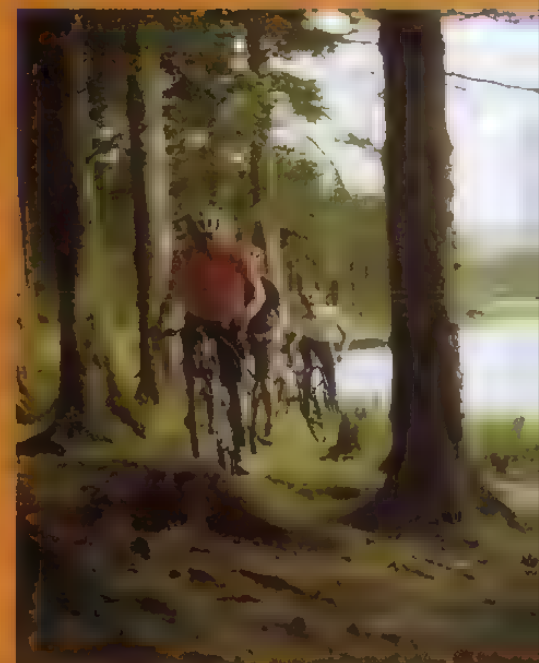
Chris Amson, an inward investment advisor at One NorthEast, is also keen to point out that there's more to the area than its urban centres. "One third of the region is designated as an area of outstanding natural beauty," he asserts. "You can go kite surfing at Bamburgh Beach or surfing at Tynemouth. You can do rock climbing, mountain biking, hiking." **Steve Walmsley** of Mere Mortals is similarly enthusiastic about the area's natural environment: "Half an hour down the road you're into the hills of Northumbria, 20 minutes the other way and you're at the stunning coastline." Mick Stockton, the studio's operations director, claims that one of the company's coders came to work in the area just for the surfing.

As for practicalities, house prices are reasonable with the average cost of a two bed semi hovering around £150,000. "There's a massive student population here so there's lots of good quality — and I mean good quality — shared accommodation," says Jobling. Fashionable young areas like Heaton, Jesmond and Gosforth provide an easy commute to Newcastle town centre via the excellent Metro system. Newcastle's international airport is minutes from the city centre, offering cheap flights to UK and European destinations. There are also connections by sea to Norway, Sweden and Holland. For those outside of the UK looking to work in the area, it seems there are few problems with red tape. As **Giselle Stewart** at Ubisoft Reflections explains. "We need to obtain a work permit for anyone coming from outside of the EU and, to date, we have an excellent success record with this. We have never had a single permit application refused in the 12 years that we have applied for them. All of the developers here provide excellent relocation support."

So, 25 years on from those first few fledgling studios, the north east remains a key sector for the UK videogame industry. The two words that cropped up time and again whenever we asked local game studios about this area were 'vibrancy' and 'passion'. Multi-million pound regeneration of urban centres is creating an ultra modern environment for the enlightened digerati, while the potent mix of public sector funding and an enthused academic quarter provide an engine for economic change. The ghosts of traditional industry and the worn, rusted stereotypes that surround them, are slowly but firmly being put to rest.

Chris Amson, (inward investment marketing specialist advisor, One NorthEast)

Darren Falcus, (co-MD, Atomic Planet)

Brian Jobling, (managing director, Eutechnyx)

Carri Cunliffe, (head of sector development, Codeworks)

Steve Walmsley, (managing director, Meze Motors)

Mick Stockton, (operations director, Meze Motors)

Giselle Stewart, (general manager, Ubisoft Reflections)

HIT THE NORTH

Over the past decade, north east England has been transformed. Once an area reliant on heavy industry, it now has a dynamic knowledge-led economy. At the heart of this success story is a thriving digital sector, and game development is very much at the forefront of the area's technological rebirth. We set up a meeting at the sumptuous Malmaison hotel on Newcastle's famed quayside and invited a selection of key local developers to talk through this intriguing success story. In sight of such regeneration symbols as the Baltic art gallery and Sage exhibition centre, we collectively wondered just what it is that's driving the success of this much overlooked region.

Let's begin with the obvious question: how did such a large cluster of game studios spring up here?
Brian Jobling: Well, there's a wealth of natural talent here due to the universities — it's not just people from the north east, it's people who've come into the north east to study. That's the major factor.
Darren Falcus: I'd say it's the history of development in the north east. We go back 25 years and companies have tended to stay in the area, so there's always been a good hotbed, a good foundation for building studios.
Brian Jobling: If you think about the region and all of its conventional industries, what you find are blue-collar workers and white-collar education. People aren't scared

of hard work here, but they're also highly educated, which is a fairly rare combination today.

But are most of your employees sourced from the local population?
Giselle Stewart: About 15 years ago that was the case, but it did change in about 1996-1997. I noticed we were recruiting from around the world, we were getting interest from the southern hemisphere, particularly people want to come here to get into the games industry.
Steve Walmsley: We've probably got no more than 10-15 per cent of local people. The rest, I think, made a conscience decision to move into the area.

Joe Neate producer Midway Newcastle

The north east is crying out for talent to join its current boom. We join this unique community to reveal the secrets behind its formation
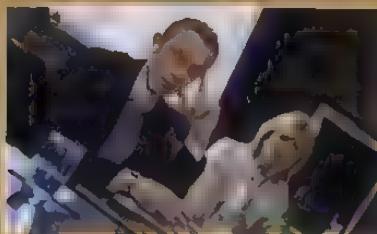
In terms of education, there seem to be mixed feelings about specialist game courses right now – some say they're valuable, but many say they're producing graduates with a shallow base of skills.

Steve Walmsley: The industry changes quickly and I think the universities are having difficulty adapting. Perhaps in some senses they shouldn't be trying to adapt, they should be sticking to the core skills that employers in the games industry need

Carri Cunliffe: I think it's very difficult for the universities because each game company has a different way of working. What they try to do is give students a broad experience, and sometimes that doesn't meet an individual company's needs. But I think universities in this region are trying more to look to the industry

Mick Stockton: There's a lot of proprietary software up here – all the companies around this table have their own engine technologies. So you can never really hope to have someone who hits the ground running straight out of university. But as Brian pointed out, if you've got people who are hard working and not afraid of that, you shouldn't really have a problem

Brian Jobling: As a developer you have to put a lot in to [university courses] at the early stages to get something out. For example, a lot of our guys are already external examiners. We work with the University of Northumbria

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on their syllabus, we're also working with Newcastle University on their really high-end programming. And that's really a three- or four-year investment – we're not going to see any returns for a while. I think the universities are very conscious of the guys coming straight in trying to cherry-pick their best students, but if you go in and work with them they'll tip you the wink on who's the best, and they'll also steer their students to ensure that the people who work with them get their pick.

Giselle Stewart: The universities have become much better at reaching out to us for help. We're helping to validate Northumbria's new game design and development course, and Teesside are even thinking about putting in post graduate courses that we can influence directly. So, within a year, we've got people with more immediately useful skills.

Steve Walmsley: There's another problem though. There's lots of anecdotal evidence that kids are coming out of school now without achieving maths
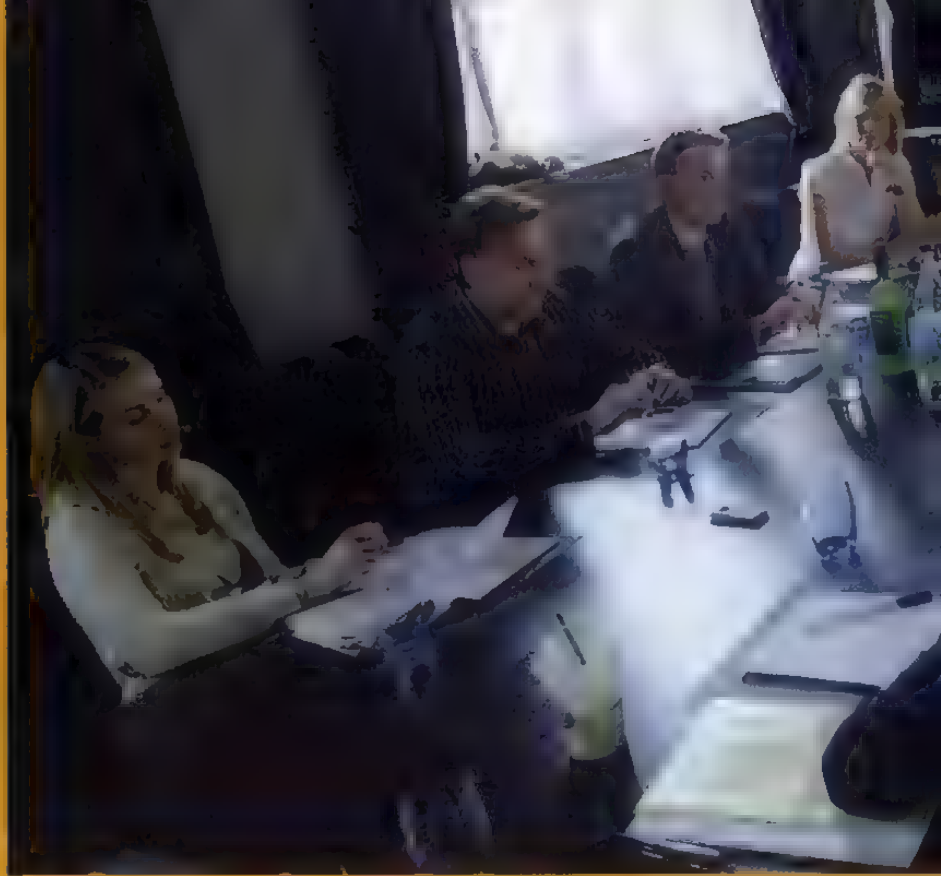
qualifications, and it's quite difficult for would-be programmers to start a games development course without that kind of maths understanding.

Universities are commercial organisations and we're aware of courses that are struggling to recruit. If they can't recruit, they'll shut down. If you've not got a flow of students with A Level maths coming into a programming discipline, it's difficult to recruit for that course, and therefore it has a massive knock-on effect for the industry.

Joe Neate: We've picked up quite a few people from the local universities – we've got some great mission designers and world designers out of the design channels at Teesside. Obviously they've had to come in and learn a bit, but now they're really integral to the project, and they've only been with us for six to nine months.

But there's still a lot of value in the bedroom coder who doesn't necessarily have an undergraduate education, yes?

Joe Neate: Definitely. They could be the sort of person who comes in, works into the evenings when they shouldn't be and puts together a new game feature that you didn't have time to schedule for.

Steve Walmsley: It shows they're keen to get into

the business. You do get graduates coming through who appear to have worked on nothing outside of their course, and that generally indicates that perhaps there's a lack of passion there

What efforts do you make in order to recruit from outside of the area?

Chris Amson: That's certainly something that ties into the regional image campaign which One NorthEast is developing and rolling out over the next three years. There's going to be more targeted activity to attract talent and promote the region as a great place to live, work, do business and invest

What form does the campaign take?

Chris Amson: The campaign has been running since 2005 and in September it will start to carry more specific business sector messages. The campaign will include a number of elements – advertising in the broadsheets, for example – as well as more targeted advertising which picks out key sector publications and websites. And then the talent attraction aspect will also be running in conjunction with universities targeting students, so we're really positioning the north east of England as somewhere people can come to to have a good lifestyle but also combine that with a full career

Carri Cunliffe: I think a lot of the studios are doing their own PR now, too. Traditionally, developers didn't because the marketing was handled by publishers. But because of the competition for talent, the guys here have been doing their own campaigns, also think GameHorizon has tried to help with that. There's this kind of critical mass of game developers

here, so when people come up, there are real career opportunities – it's not just a case of coming for five years and moving on, because if you do want to leave a company for whatever reason, there's another studio down the road

Giselle Stewart: People think very carefully about their careers these days, and there's a whole range of developers here. If they want to work for an independent, that's here, if they want to work for a global company, that's here as well. Some people plan their career thinking, 'I want to work in the games industry, but I don't want to stay in one place. Well, global companies like ours may offer the opportunity for secondments and travel. You also get to know other people in the industry through the opportunities that Codeworks and GameHorizon throw out

Brian Jobling: Going back to the original question, people will come when great games come out of the north east again, we've got *Ferrari*, there's Reflections' next product, Mere Mortals have had chart success… That will attract people to work in the region. We've just got to get our games out!

Chris Amson: That's absolutely right, and it's that critical mass we're building, out of having creative synergy and not competition, that makes it attractive for people to come and work in the region. It's somewhere where people are going to benefit from not only the knowledge they get from the company they're working for but also the network too

Why are so many driving games made here?

Giselle Stewart: Well, there's a great expertise in the

area because of it! If people want to stay in the region, circulate round the companies. We've built this huge expertise in the driving game genre

Darren Falcus: But also there's a need for it; there's a market for it – all these driving studios are doing really well

Brian Jobling: Pitbull, which is now Midway – was formed out of employees from our three studios, so therefore it's natural they'd form an additional studio based around driving games

Darren Falcus: That's a classic example of how the north east works well, people from our studios got together, formed a new company and now it's successful – it's Midway

Carri Cunliffe: Without the GameHorizon networking events the smaller companies wouldn't get to meet the larger companies – it's an easy introduction for them, in an informal environment

Darren Falcus: Also, it gets the bigger companies talking to each other and sharing resources, which we never did before

Brian Jobling: One of our ex-guys went down to Sega's racing studio [which recently closed] and Darren asked me if he's worth taking, and I said "Yes, he is". That's the relationship we didn't have six or seven years ago. Darren used to steal staff from me, we used to steal them from Reflections, but now we talk to each other about staff.

Another example, we had this great, great artist. I rang Midway up and said "He's stale here, he deserves something", and I told him what he should ask them for. That's the kind of relationship we have. And so now he's over at Midway and he's doing really, really we

Giselle Stewart: Why didn't you ring me?
Brian Jobling: I'd have got round to you eventually!
Steve Walmsley: The alliance is broken!

What's it like for the larger companies to come into this area where there are obviously quite strong ties between the local, smaller studios? Do your parent companies understand that there's quite a community feel here? Do they place restrictions on your involvement?
Joe Neate: That's a difficult question. Giselle, why don't you start? I've not heard of any restrictions we are quite an independent studio in some ways, we really want to build a relationship with everyone here in the north east. We've only been here for two or three years and I think there was a bit of a rough patch at the beginning, but we want to build – we want to get known; we want to help get the north east known as a great area for games development. We're sending people to Develop to do demos; we're really trying to sell Midway Newcastle as the company's European presence. It's a brilliant area and it's really economically viable as well – to live in, to run a studio in…
Giselle Stewart: Reflections has been around for a long time, but it's been part of Ubisoft for a couple of years, so we have the benefit of attracting people who want to conduct their career in a different way. People come from other Ubisoft studios to us and go back, and so aren't necessarily going into different studios in this area. At the same time, though, we work for the north east attracting talent into the area, working with universities to develop what we have here. There are studios we can't work with, but none of them are here – we all have various gentlemen's agreements going on.

Brian Jobling: Occasionally emails will go round you know, "Someone's dev kit has gone down – can you help us out?" and someone always does. GameHorizon has really got us talking to each other. I never believed five years ago we'd all be sitting in a room together. There was a lot of bad feeling.
Joe Neate: It's like marriage counselling!
Steve Walmsley: I don't really feel like I'm in competition with anyone here in terms of chasing the same contracts. So in a way working together is a more logical way of moving forward. I think we've competed for staff but never for projects.
Darren Falcus: Generally, there's a need for staff in the region. I mean, we do have great staff and we've got university graduates coming through, but we need to attract more.
Giselle Stewart: When a really hot candidate comes up and the agency has lined them up with four interviews in one day – *that* can be interesting.
**Darren Falcus:** Even with something like that we're more professional, we work together.
Giselle Stewart: Sometimes they're just not our fit – we don't think they'll work in our team. But they might be right for someone else.
Brian Jobling: That's right – we win some, we lose some, but the region has picked up an extra person.
Carri Cunliffe: I think it's quite interesting though; if you look across the UK, there are other networks but I actually think this is the strongest. Game Republic has been going longer but I don't think they have that sense of collaboration. They wouldn't ring someone from another company and ask for a favour – I think that's unique to the north east.

So we're back to the heart of the matter: what is it about the north east?
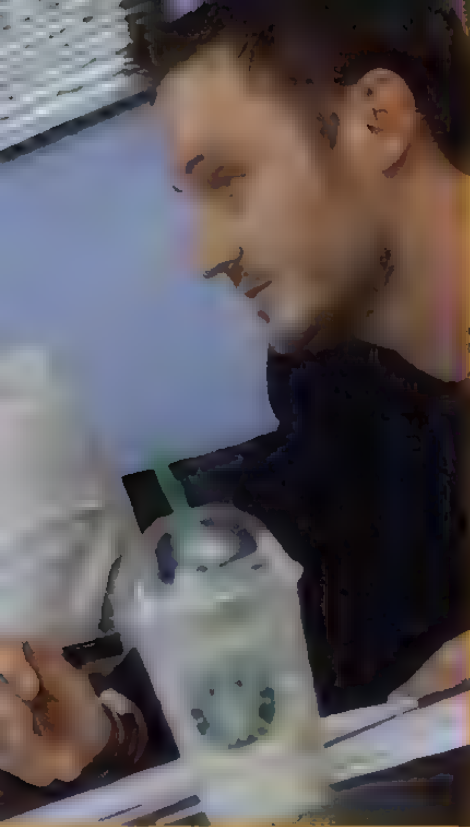
the UK? Or is it just a reality of the industry?

Darren Falcus: We're just starting to outsource and I think it's complemental. I don't think it's a threat

Giselle Stewart: It's inevitable that we will outsource art, for example, now – Ubisoft has its own art studios in China and is opening one in Ind a

Brian Jobling: The vulnerability about outsourcing is, we outsourced with a Vietnamese company and then EA came along and just took the whole capacity for the next two years, so that's why we've set up our own studios. But if you find a good outsourcer they'll hire the staff and train them to ensure you always get a constant source of people. I don't see how we could compete without outsourcing, considering the team sizes and the amount of content that the public expects with each generation of technology

Mick Stockton: One thing you can't outsource is

Brian Jobling: You just have to look at the env ronment – look along the quayside and you can see the massive redevelopment

Darren Falcus: And it's one of the top ten places in the world to go out at night. We need to push the cultural angle

Steve Walmsley: That helps tremendously – you come to Newcastle and this is a vibrant city, it's a cultural city. Then half an hour down the road you're into the hills of Northumbria, 20 minutes the other way you're at the stunning coastline

Brian Jobling: Two major airlines are interested in flying direct from Newcastle to the States. I think when that happens, when you look at what happened with Dubai, that'll help us a great amount

Mick Stockton: Even now within 40 minutes you can be in London, in an hour you can be in Paris... You can get to every major city in Europe from here. We've taken a lot of people from the University of Abertay, John Moores and other places further south they don't tend to leave the area. They may not stay with us, but they stay in the area

Darren Falcus: Middlesbrough is great, too. It's 30 minutes away, you can easily commute to Newcastle. There's the massive Middle Haven Quayside project – a £350m development. Obviously Newcastle is the prime draw, but Middlesbrough's catching up'

Brian Jobling: There's also the support that the region gives you – our two Asian studios were set up with help from One NorthEast. So they weren't just interested in what they could do for us within the region, they wanted to help us expand outside the region too

On the subject of outsourcing, is there any sense that this represents a threat to smaller studios in

deas, and that's something we have in abundance in the UK, and in the north east specifically – when we need the work doing we'll outsource, but we see our studio in Newcastle as a hub for creating new IP. When we moved to outsourcing, a lot of our guys on the art side moved over to design and that served us incredibly well. Where we are at the moment, we're in the bus ness of selling the idea side of things. Getting the work done is secondary – we can always get that done somewhere

Giselle Stewart: There are plenty of outsource companies that we use locally as well – it's not just art we need to bring in, it's post-production, it's scriptwriting, and those are available here to a very high standard

Carri Cunliffe: The other thing is the smaller startups from Teesside University are developing for different platforms – they're working on Nintendo DS, WiiWare, etc – so although they can do outsourcing for other companies, they're actually working on their own IP as well

Joe Neate: When you're outsourcing to the Far East or whatever, your primary focus is cost whereas for stuff like scriptwriting and ideas, the focus is quality and cost doesn't matter quite as much. For that, you really need to go with experience, which is much more readily available here in the north east and the UK as a whole

So what are the key issues facing game development in the north east right now?
Joe Neate: Staff
Chris Arnson: Do you think we suffer more than other areas in terms of our staff issue?
Darren Falcus: You get so many people now who left the area five or ten years ago, who wanted to do the US or London thing, and now they're all wanting to come back to what is a familiar, happy and passionate area
Joe Neate: I'm seeing a lot of that at Midway, actually – people who've gone down to London and just want to come back to the north east Five years in London is enough for most people!
Mick Stockton: This imaginary divide between north and south exists only in the minds of people from the UK Go into places like Poland and they don't think about north or south
Carri Cunliffe: That's the thing – sometimes it's easier to attract someone from another country as opposed to the south east, because for some bizarre reason there's still a certain perception of the area When we're travelling around talking to people from other countries at trade delegations, we don't get any negative comments. But as soon as we meet someone from the south, they're like, 'Oh, do you have electricity? Do you have the internet?'"
Brian Jobling: To everyone else, we're just a small

island Someone from a major publisher once phoned me from London and asked what was the right tube stop for Newcastle

How about the future of game development in the north east? Where are things going to be in three or four years' time?
Darren Falcus: We have a great foundation and we're going to build on it We've got everything we need – we've been here for 25 years, we've got great established studios, new studios coming through plenty of talent, plenty of university cooperation
Joe Neate: Do you think we should be instructing the unis on how they run their courses?
Steve Walmsley: What I'd like to see is more course tutors coming and spending time actually working within a game studio There's a tendency for universities to be detached – you only have to be out of the business for 12 months and you've lost touch with it already
Darren Falcus: Working closely with the universities is important. Teesside was one of the first in the country to run videogame courses It's always had a strong background in computing, and the guys who run it actually used to work for us. They've got some good cred b tv
Brian Jobling: Teesside is heavily programming based – we're going to take on nine sandwich-year

students this year and we're employing ten or 11 of the graduates from last year I don't think we could work any closer with the unis than we already are
Darren Falcus: As long as they continue to adapt and move forward
Giselle Stewart: I think they're more open than they ever have been – they're streamlining the courses at Teesside so that instead of the myriad they had before, they've just got one games programming one art, one animation, one design [course]. They have asked for help with the courses, they've never been as open And there's some money on the table now for workforce development and planning. The incentive is there for us to get together more
**Brian Jobling:** We've actually got a budget – and it's not an insignificant amount of money! – for working with the universities, to ensure that the presence is there That's something that's really worked for us
Carri Cunliffe: We've even had enquiries from smaller developers who want to come up and set up studios here I think that's because there's so much going on up here and they want to be part of it

So what would you say to readers who are looking to get into the game industry here?
Steve Walmsley: Just get up here – and quickly
Darren Falcus: Once they're up here, they'll love it, honestly We always say that, once we get people
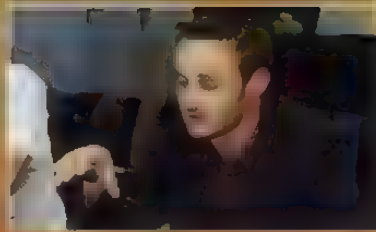
up for an interview, we're convinced we'll get them to stay.

Joe Neate: There's a variety of studios up here all doing different things, so whatever sort of development structure you want to fit into, there's something for you. If you move up here to a company and it's not quite your thing, there are so many opportunities to move around – there's no bitterness at all about moving between studios, there's a long-term career for anybody. Plus, it's a brilliant place to work – it's got great bars, great landscapes, great people. I'm not sure about the football teams, though.

Giselle Stewart: We took someone on from China recently and he was a bit bemused by the process, he was just so overwhelmed by how much help he got when it came to moving, how we spoke to his agency over there, how we sorted out his work

> "There's a variety of studios up here all doing different things, so whatever sort of development structure you want to fit into, there's something for you"

permit, how we brought him over and looked for opportunities for his wife, found him accommodation, helped him integrate. But I think it's something about the north east. We do look after our people well. We recognise it's an industry that makes huge demands of people in terms of commitment, time and effort, and we try to hang on to them, to show them there's a decent career structure and lifestyle. And the fact that there is such an established industry here, people often quite surprised when we say, if you're thinking of moving on, talk to us," it's something we can fix, that's great. Otherwise we pick up the phone and see if there's another home for them to go to.

Joe Neate: There's an opportunity to work on great games here too. Triple-A, world-class games.

Brian Jobling: Exactly – I mean, can you think of any other region where there are so many long established world-class developers?

Darren Falcus: There's nowhere else.

Carri Cunliffe: The studios have a really good social scene up here too. One of the things we've been doing is non-boss events, and companies are quite happy to send their staff to them. The idea is that its lots of young professionals networking, creating this scene across all digital companies.

Brian Jobling: We try to sneak in wearing wigs

Darren Falcus: And comedy beards...

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ATOMIC PLANET

ATOMIC PLANET
The Falcuses have gone from bedroom to boardroom. Now they're moving on to Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3

Great Battles Of Rome is one of Atomic Planet's many TV and movie tie-ins. Work on large-scale 360/PS3 projects will begin later this year

■ CEO MD   Operations director ■

Interview:
Darren Falcus
Jason Falcus

Quaint animal sim *An Arctic Tale* provided Atomic Planet with Wii and Nintendo DS experience

From bedroom coding to global corporate takeover and almost back again, the Falcus brothers have seen it all through 25 tumultuous years in the industry. Their first company, Optimus Software, was bought by Iguana in 1993 only to become part of the Acclaim Entertainment behemoth a year later. Before the publisher's self-destruction, the Falcuses got out and set up Atomic Planet. With a range of arcade conversions and licensed titles behind them, preparations are now in place for a move to 'next-gen' development

Yours is the classic bedroom coding story, right?
Darren Falcus: Our first game was published by local publisher Paramount Software in 1983. They saw an opportunity to get games into WH Smiths. There was no retail distribution then.
Jason Falcus: It was car boot sales and game fairs! But Paramount went for it in a big way – they had adverts in the computer press every month. It was great to have a double-page advert in a magazine when you're still at school!

Nowadays you're running an independent studio – is it difficult to get staff up here?
JF: People have a preconceived idea about the north east being very industrial but it's changed over the last 20 years. There are a lot of high-tech and multimedia companies here. Half our staff have relocated from outside the area, and once they're here they love it

What are you working on right now?
JF: Three multiplatform games – the plan is to start our big next-gen projects later this year

Will that mean significant growth?
DF: We don't need to be massive. As soon as you go past 70 people, your culture – your whole work ethic – changes. There's no problem going larger, though it's just dictated by what our projects are
JF: It's very dangerous for an independent studio to grow too fast on the basis of one project – anything could happen. The alternative is: get to a certain size, outsource the rest and learn to manage that process

What kind of staff are you looking for?
DF: We like our teams to be a mix of experienced staff and newcomers with enthusiasm and great new ideas. We love this industry, but you can become jaded. So when new staff come in, it brings new life
JF: We get direct applicants, guys through agencies, contractors, graduates – a good mix. We've had a couple of guys from Sweden, they have a great course over there called Gamemaker. These guys did a team project, which was a multiplayer FPS, along the lines of *Turok* – it was a really competent demo. We get so many guys who come to us with no examples of their work, not even a simple *Space Invaders* game!
DF: Just put a demo together with the Torque Game Engine or something. You've got to show pass on

Will you remain independent?
DF: We want to run a studio that's successful whatever guise it comes in, whether it's independent or being part of a larger company
JF: That's the politician's answer!
DF: What's better for our staff is better for us. Some of these people have worked for us for 20 years, we've all grown up together. It's a family.

NEWCASTLE : HONG KONG : CHENGDU : PITTSBURGH

GAME OVER

EUTECHNYX

by KOZIK

EUTECHNYX

With Ferrari Challenge finished and plenty more in the pipe, this driving specialist is keeping its engines warm

Car models for *Ferrari Challenge* were produced at Eutechnyx's Chengdu studio before being taken to Gateshead for polishing

Surprisingly, Eutechnyx's Ferrari title features damage modelling. The team made the most of it

Interview:
Brian Jobling

Managing director

F ormed over 20 years ago as Zeppelin Games, Eutechnyx is an unsung veteran of the racing genre and a hardy survivor of the volatile UK dev scene. Once bought by US publisher Merit Studios, then tied into an exclusive publishing deal with Infogrames, the company has been fully independent for eight years and is now expanding to cope with the pressures of modern-day development. Work is finished on the anticipated *Ferrari Challenge*, but with an ambitious unannounced project and a driving-based MMOG in the pipeline, there's plenty more lined up to follow it

Why is that Eutechnyx has a low staff turnover when compared to other developers?
That's a theme you'll see throughout the north east – once we have staff we try our hardest to keep them! We're the only UK developer with Investors in People accreditation. Sometimes it takes three or four years to get it, we got it in two-and-a-half weeks. Over 20 per cent of our in-house staff have been here over a decade, with 30 per cent of that number being here over 15 years. The secret? Treat your staff well, offer them a genuine career path, be loyal and appreciate their work, and they'll do the same to you

What about your relationship with universities?
We have a programme called Level Up where we go into unis like Abertay, Hull and Brighton and try and hire as many graduates as we can from their final year. But it's also a long-term investment because we take students on their sandwich year – we let them train on the job then they go back for a year and we just hope they return to us. Our Ferrari game is getting great

press and that's been produced with a team of graduates from this region, competing against the might of companies like Sony

Is it just programming graduates you're after?
One of our top technologists has a PhD in environmental chemistry. His work, something to do with soil acidity, involved such complex calculations that he had to teach himself how to program. So we picked him up and trained him on games. Our engine is massive already so the technologists can work on really small areas of the game and never have to see or work on the full product

Outsourcing is now a key element in the industry. How has this changed things at Eutechnyx?
We were the first western developer into China. We started using freelance companies in Shanghai and Vietnam in 2001, then opened our studio in Hong Kong. Later, we decided to start up in another region. I was working with a company in Chengdu – they were doing some artwork for us – and I mentioned I wanted to set up a car modelling studio. One of the guys I met rang up a few weeks later and said, "We've started your studio – we've got 20 people ready to go", so I gave them a trial and they were amazing

They had an opening ceremony for the studio. I thought it would just be a glass of champagne in the office but they'd assembled the whole of the Chengdu government – this is a region of 18 million people! Most of our art now originates in China but it's polished here. Without outsourcing, we just wouldn't have been able to compete in the current generation

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MERE MORTALS

With its uniquely diverse remit, this growing company is a world away from the archetypal dev studio

Best known for its *Board Game Collection* (top) and *PDC World Championship Darts* titles, Mere Mortals is now moving on to development of original IP

Interview:
Mick Stockton
Steve Walmsley
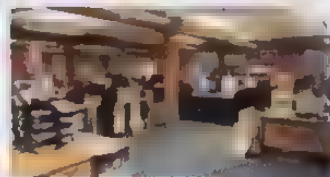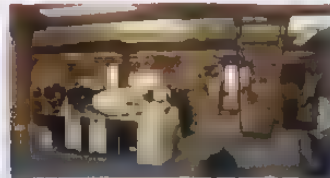
■ Operations director   Managing director ■

F ounded by game coder Graeme Love and TV industry veteran David Jeffries, Mere Mortals is part game studio, part web designer and part TV and movie production house. Previously, these wings operated independently, but in the new era of converged media, they're sliding together. We were keen to find out what a diverse remit means to staff currently working on eight titles across Xbox 360, PS3, Wii, PSP, XBLA and PSN

You've worked on mostly outsourced and casual projects so far. How are things changing?
Steve Walmsley: We want to develop our own IP. About 12 months ago we started working on some concepts that had been bubbling under for a while. We worked those up to full concept and presented them to a couple of publishers. Two have been taken up – one is the biggest contract we've ever signed. It's been a significant move forwards for us.
Mick Stockton: It's a great time for a company of our size because there's been a lot of interest in new and innovative ideas. We don't have a huge amount of revenue tied up in very big projects and this lets us do stuff like PSN and XBLA, which is where we're getting a lot of interest. We can be more risky in terms of our design and development, and we're being encouraged to do that, especially by the big US publishers

Where do your new staff generally come from?
MS: Our design team is primarily people from Abertay university. When you look at the Dare To Be Digital festival, companies like EA and Microsoft are really buying into the kind of innovation. Just look at EA Blueprint: smaller teams, lower budgets. It's a good

time for a company of our size – we can base most of what we do around taking risks

What do you look for in new employees?
SW: If we find someone who's come out of uni with sound maths skills, that's a start for us. Next is opening up their creativity. We also want to open their minds to the fact that they can work in other areas of the business – we've had a couple of game artists who've produced TV adverts, and they loved it
MS: All art applicants should have good hand drawing skills. If someone has that, the tools are going to be irrelevant – whether they're working in 3D or just vector stuff, they're going to be good artists

Does working on downloadable titles mean your teams get a more diverse working environment?
MS: When you've got a project turnaround of 12-16 weeks, you hit the ground running, you don't have time to get complacent. You don't get that traditional wait for the crunch at the end. You could be working on five or six different projects in a year. It keeps the ideas fresh, it keeps people fresh

What's the future for Mere Mortals?
MS: We don't want to lose our creativity. When you're bigger, you have to think about how you're going to pay everyone, so you take fewer risks. We have a great luxury at the moment – if anyone on the team has an idea, we investigate it, we try to get it to demo level as soon as possible and if we think it's strong enough, we'll pitch it to publishers. Look at companies like Media Molecule – that's an ideas house and that's where we'd like to be.

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MIDWAY NEWCASTLE

Having bought into the north east, the US publisher has fostered a culture of sharing both tech and talent
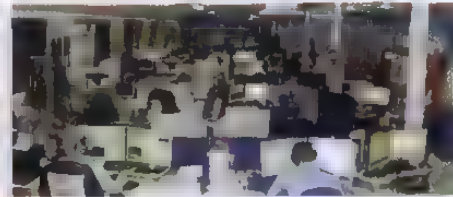
MIDWAY

The Midway Newcastle office is packed; as work nears completion on *Wheelman*, the team is scouting for a new home

Interview:
Joe Neate
Mark Thompson

■ Producer   Lead mission designer ■

B ack in 2005, Midway bought Pitbull Syndicate, and the indie studio became the publisher's only development presence outside of the US. The team kicked off its new life with hyper-kinetic driving adventure *Wheelman*, imagined as a narrative prequel to the forthcoming Vin Diesel movie, and designed in conjunction with the actor and his Tigon production company. Intriguingly, Newcastle shares a common game technology with its five fellow studios – a massively modified version of the Unreal 3 engine. But has the indie spirit flourished or fallen within the Midway hive-mind?

How has the studio grown since the takeover?
Mark Thompson: We had 45 staff at Pitbull and now we're on around 90. When Midway bought the studio for this project we said, "We need talent!", so we just pulled people from all over the world – whoever we needed, we got. It wasn't difficult to recruit – if you go to anyone and say, "We're going to make a massive open-world driving game – it's got a movie tie-in, it's got Vin Diesel", people will be chomping at the bit.

Is it fair to say that prospective employees must provide demos when applying nowadays?
MT: Yeah, absolutely. There are so many games these days that get released with the engine on the disc, or at least a level editor. So many games of this generation are using the Unreal engine – you can pick up a copy of *Unreal Tournament 2004* for a fiver and that comes with a full set of tools you can use to build your own content. When I get a CV it's fine to see

where someone is coming from, but to understand what someone knows about 3D level design, it's best to experience it in 3D – if they give me a level I can run around it and see how they're thinking.

With so many staff and a huge US publisher, does the studio still have its own individuality?
Joe Neate: Each Midway studio has its own sense of independence and responsibility for the game that it's working on. But we have a big shared technology across all of the studios, so in a way, everyone's working together toward a greater goal. Our HSVD [high speed vehicle driving] guy is helping out the other studios that want this feature in their games – at the same time we have five *Stranglehold* designers from Chicago working on our game because they're experts in on-foot gameplay. There's this knowledge base of up to 700 staff across the world we can use.

How much control do you have over *Wheelman*, considering its movie tie-in foundations?
JN: Our creative director Simon Woodroffe is the driving force behind the game. Vin Diesel has had a lot of input into the story and special features, and Tigon gives a lot of feedback and wrote the script, but Simon has the creative vision.

Has he spent time with Vin Diesel?
JN: Yes, Simon met him in Prague. The first thing they did was play a fighting game for *two hours*. They're obviously both big gamers so they were really testing each other.

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UBISOFT

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Veteran Newcastle studio Reflections is enjoying a creative renaissance with a new, design-led owner

Having recently finished work on *Emergency Heroes* (far right), the Reflections team is gearing up for a big push with the next *Driver*
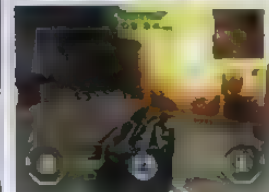
Interview:
Gareth Edmonson

Studio manager ■

Having passed through the hands of defunct US publisher GT Interactive and troubled Infogrames label Atari, this veteran Newcastle-based studio is now a part of the ever-growing Ubisoft empire. Renowned for its innovative driving games, the studio hit a low point in 2004 with the rushed *Driver 3*. But with the financial and creative muscle of Ubisoft behind it and a renewed sense of purpose, the team is now beginning work on *Driver's* intriguing comeback.

Has the culture of development changed at Reflections since the Ubisoft takeover?
Ubisoft has 4,350 employees around the world and 3,500 of those are involved in development, so it's very heavily development-focused. Atari were much more publishing and distribution. There's also a real focus on design. We spend a long time in pre-production getting the design right, which is why you won't see a new *Driver* for a while. Ubisoft has a reputation for re-establishing brands, which is why they bought us, so we're tearing down all the walls and starting again, basically.

There's also a culture of sharing. *Emergency Heroes* was a collaboration with studios in Barcelona and Shanghai. With *Driver*, we're collaborating with a studio in Annecy in France, plus a few others.

Why not simply expand Reflections?
Ubisoft's growth around the world has been huge, but not in western Europe, simply because of costs, so we bring in resources as and when we can. Annecy has done all the *Splinter Cell* online modes, so they have a lot of experience in that area, which we don't.

Where do you look when you're recruiting?
It's a mixture. We recruit locally as much as possible, mostly graduates. For coders, we tend to hire more traditional skills – maths, physics, computer science. We don't really hire that many artists any more – a lot of outsourcing happens these days. But we're always short of people. Being part of Ubisoft helps with recruitment, though – people who join us know they'll have the option of working at other Ubisoft studios around the world. We've got one guy in Shanghai at the moment working on *EndWar*, for example.

What do you think of the game-specific university courses out there right now?
We're working with universities to make them more relevant – there's a lack of focus. The games industry moves very fast and the courses don't. Ubisoft does its own training, but there's a global shortage of game designers at the moment. A lot of people don't understand what design means. They think it's art rather than the fundamentals of game mechanics – some courses get it, others don't. The new game design course at Northumbria looks good. They're doing things like ludology, a fundamental study of the interaction between the player and game rules.

How much of a creative input is Ubisoft having with *Driver*? Is Serge Hascoët getting involved?
Serge and his team have a lot of influence. We listen to them, take away their ideas – it's a very deep rooted process into the design of the game and we have to get that right first before we mess about with fancy graphics. We have to be able to convince people we have a unique design, which is great

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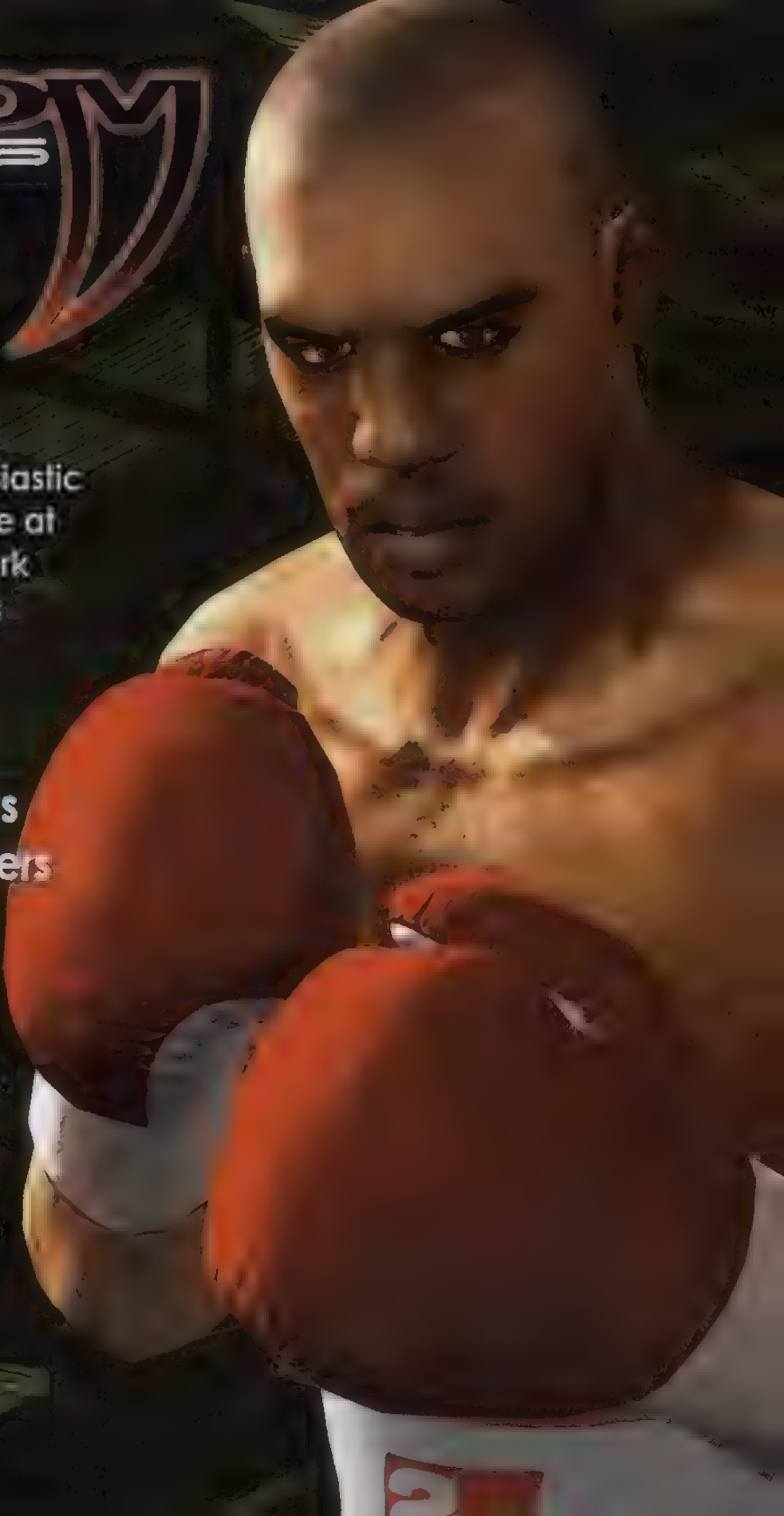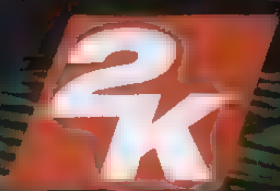
VENOM GAMES

Formed from the ashes of Rage Software and owned by Take-Two, Venom has some big decisions to make...

Having just finished *Don King Presents Prizefighter*, the 30-man team at Venom is now considering its next project. The small studio has begun using outsourcing to compete on current console hardware

Interview:
Peter Johnson

Studio head ■

Formed by Peter Johnson, an old-school coder with dozens of 8- and 16bit coin-op conversions to his name, Venom was an independent studio for just over a year before being bought by Take-Two in September 2004. As an ex-studio head for Rage, Johnson employed most of the staff responsible for the movie tie-in *Rocky*, before producing a sequel (*Rocky Legends*), then an Xbox 360 conversion of Human Head's shooter *Prey*. The team has just finished *Don King Presents Prizefighter* and is now working on designs for its next title

Your time as an indie developer was quite short-lived; what prompted your move to Take-Two?
We'd been talking to them since March 2004 – we didn't know what our next project was going to be so we were trying to set things up. When we got to the end of *Rocky*, Ubi said they'd like to buy us, and Take-Two said, "Well, we'd like to buy you, too". In the end, we went for Take-Two. It was a clean slate for us in terms of tech. Going to Take-Two was a jump up to the next generation of hardware

Venom is a small studio – is it big enough to compete in today's climate?
We've just completed the 360 version of *Prizefighter* and we had 30 people all working on that project. Traditionally, certainly with the Rocky games, everything was done in-house – obviously they were on earlier-generation hardware. For *Prizefighter*, some of the character likenesses were handled by 2K's studio in Shanghai and they did a pretty good job. Using outsource studios is important for the future of western development given the cost differences. But

we know what makes a good game in the west, they still have to learn that – and they will, scarily enough. For now, keeping things cost effective is a case of balancing the original input from the guys here with volume made up via outsourcing

What type of people do you look for when it comes to recruiting?
People who are self-sufficient – good problem solvers. That's something we always look for in an interview. Games are nothing but a series of problems, and some people have a natural flair for finding solutions

What are your plans for the future?
It's hard to say. We have a number of different options at different levels – we may go for two of the smaller projects rather than one large one. We'll stick with a boxed product rather than PSN or XBLA, but a game for, say, the Wii is not necessarily the same scope as something for Xbox 360

We want to make games that we're happy with, which sounds like a fairly woolly aim! It's always difficult when you're within a larger organisation – there's only a certain degree of self-determination – you need to follow the company plan to some extent

Is there any concern that you'll become 'Take-Two's boxing studio'?
I would be happy to do that if that's what's required. But it would be nice, after so many years, to tackle a different type of game. Before we started *Rocky*, we'd never done the same type of game twice in a row, so every project gave us a new set of challenges. It's quite fun to tackle those
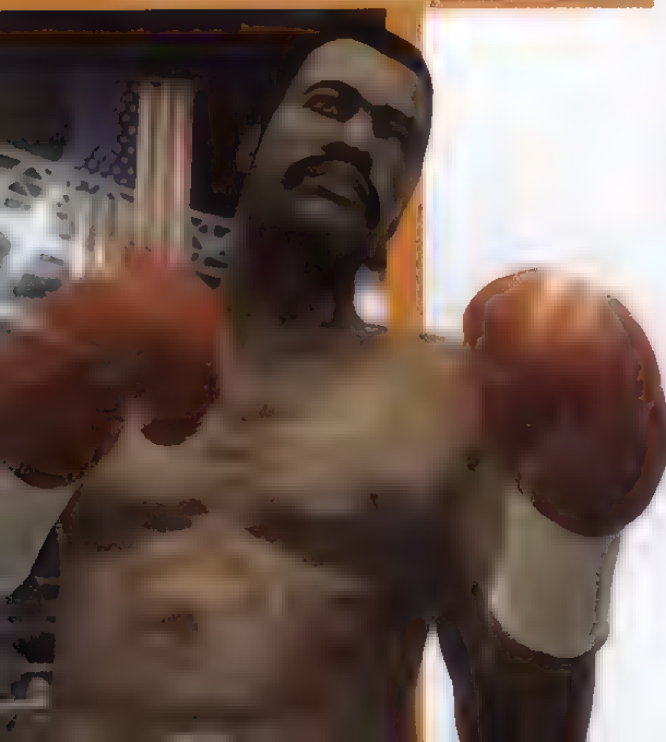
BORN IN TEESSIDE

The north east's future as a major digital player may well begin here, with a band of startup game studios and an intriguing regional development project

R ight on the edge of the University of Teesside campus, inside a converted Victorian schoolhouse, six-man game developer Halch is beavering away on a new Wii project. Just up the corridor is Philanthropy Studios, another industry newcomer with console development ambitions. Burgeoning game companies 3rd Dimension Creations and Twisted Studios have also passed through within the last couple of years.

This clutter of embryonic ventures is no coincidence. Victoria Building is now a key part of the university, providing an incubation unit for graduates looking to run businesses in the digital sector. Students ideas and turn them into business startups. These fledgling companies are then able to get business development support from the IDI's sister organisation DigitalCity Business, a Middlesbrough-based economic regeneration project set up to encourage tech business in the area.

What this all amounts to is a uniquely supportive framework for videogame newcomers. "We left university a couple of years ago and decided to set up our own company," explains Halch co-founder **Marc Williamson**. "We approached DigitalCity and were awarded a fellowship to work on some of our IP, so we spent three months doing that – by then, we'd joined much happens before that. As Williamson explains,

Publishers responded very well to our IP, our ideas and our game concepts, but they were a little scared by the fact that we were a small games company. At the time we didn't have that much of a track record, but we will soon have three games under our belt and publishers have always been happy with them."

Having taken the gamble to support the incubation businesses, Atomic Planet is an enthusiastic ambassador for the programme. "We'll go to these guys and say, 'OK, we have a commercial game for you to do'," explains operations director **Jason Falcus**. "We'll license our technology to them so it gives them

"With electronic distribution it's a brilliant time to start a game studio. There are so many options, and you get to keep the IP"

with startup ideas present their plans to a panel; if the concept looks promising, they're provided with office space within the building as well as free basic equipment. The incubator was funded with the help of regional development agency One NorthEast, and is linked with the Institute of Digital Innovation (IDI), which is also located on the University campus.

As part of the larger DigitalCity project, the IDI provides fellowships to aspiring game companies and digital entrepreneurs. The fellowships are tailor-made, providing support for those who want to take creative Codeworks, and were hanging round with the industry in the north east, getting to know people. And pretty much after finishing our concept stuff, Atomic Planet offered us our first commercial project. We built a team from there and spent seven months on that project. Now we're working on a Wii game for Mastertronic as well as developing our own IP on WiiWare and DS."

Halch's opening project was a modest one – a Bob the Builder tie-in for DS and PC. But it provided what most young studios lack – a retail product. And not a head start, give them dev kits and six months' worth of work. It's less than the going rate for us – it's not cheap, but it's value – and all of a sudden they have credibility. One of the studios we worked with got Nintendo developer status through work undertaken for us. As two unknown guys, they'd have struggled to do that alone."

Importantly, the teams also get access to a range of in-house business advisors and courses. Teesside's game degrees provide a good foundation for becoming employees in the industry, but it's a competitive world out there, and guidance of all descriptions is hugely valuable. "A lot of developers who get work from publishers pass that work on to smaller studios and they really do exploit the fact that these studios are desperate for work," explains a quietly exasperated **James West** of Philanthropy. "You just try and get what you can, then work out the pricing afterwards." To improve his bargaining skills, West is attending a business training course run within the building. "We'd all done programming and creative degrees so none of us had a clue about business, and that's one of the key things that DigitalCity's been good for – basic stuff accounting, legal, making sure you get paid."

Graduate business units (as they're known at Teesside) can stay there for two years until their project gets going. Then they're thrust into the real world – or actually just across the road. The IDI has second-stage incubation space for the right companies on the top floor of its £12m building – the team at Halch is considering moving over when its time is up. It's here that the IDI runs a fellowship programme to nurture and encourage tech startups throughout the region.

These fellowships aren't just for students, though. They're for anyone with an interesting, creative idea. Similar to the graduate setup at Victoria Building, fellowship applicants must present their vision to a
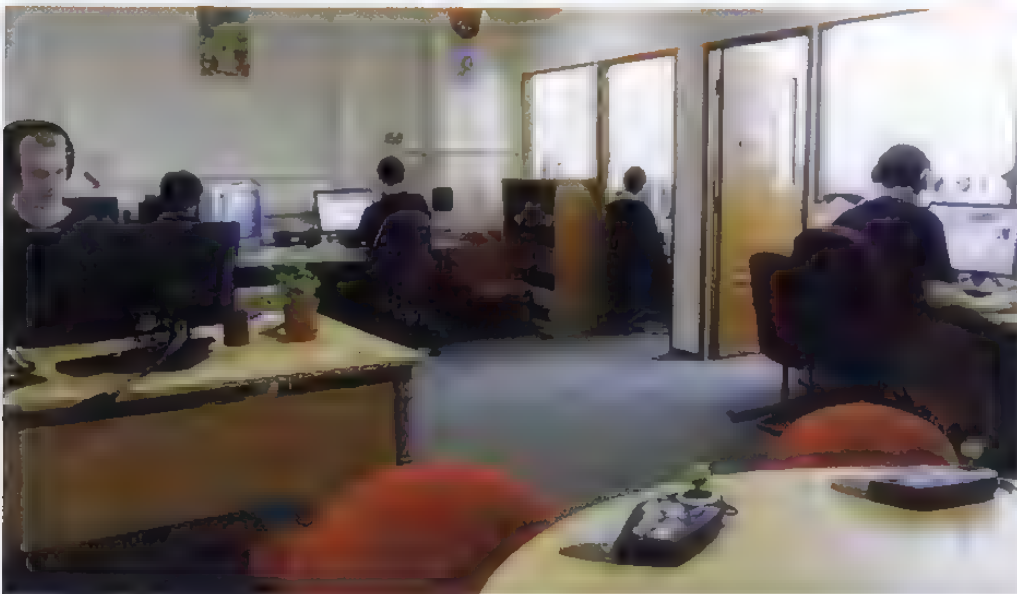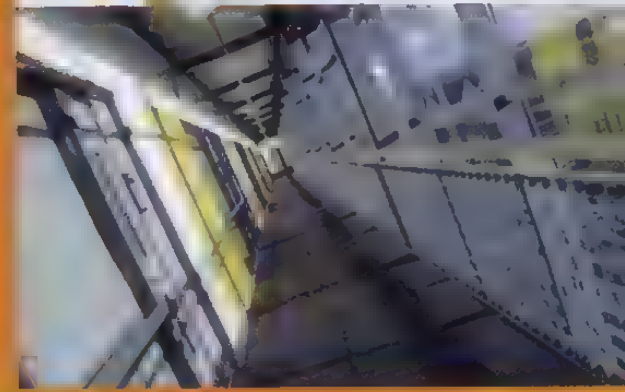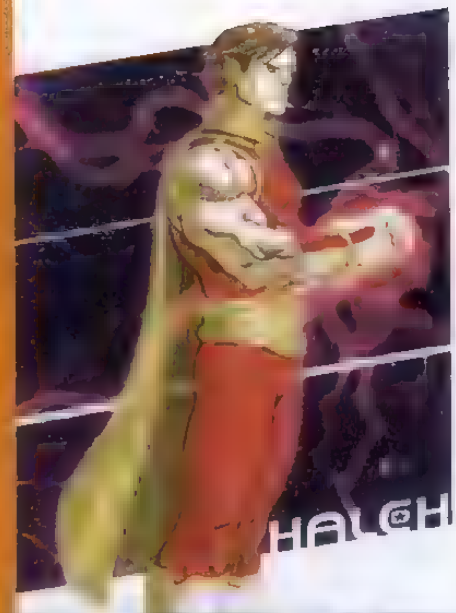
panel made up of IDI staff, industry experts and funding bodies such as NStar and Northern Film & Media ideas are assessed for creativity and commercial viability, then a selection are taken on board

"What our fellowship program does is help people *before* they fund a business," explains IDI director **Dr Jim TerKeurst**, who previously worked on the game courses at the University of Abertay "Often you need that time, encouragement and mentoring to get your idea ready, and that's what we're all about We did a pilot in 2003 and gradually it's been building over the years We've had 47 businesses start out of here "

Of those 47, six have been game developers including Babel Digital, a company specialising in the field of serious games There are now other startups looking to get into the serious gaming end of the spectrum "We're getting involved in using game technology for health," says TerKeurst "This works well, as the university is one of the biggest training grounds for health workers, nurses and so on." One concept currently in development uses basic console technology to help patients carry out rehabilitation exercises at home – a sort of therapeutic

version of *Wii Fit* Another company is creating online virtual worlds which will house distance training courses for offshore workers

Again, there's more to the fellowships than comfortable office space "Companies get support for each of their staff, access to the labs with professional-grade software and machinery, plus an on-site technician, an on-site technical director and our creative director to work with TerKeurst explains "We also bring in mentors based on their specialism, so it might be someone from the BBC or from a leading games publisher – we've had a broad range [The fellowship recipients] then have the ideal skunkworks to put their concept together, to get it ready and see if it makes sense Some of the teams fall apart sometimes the ideas can't be done, but we're guiding them as much as we can to get a solution "

Halch certainly seems to be one of the success stories, formulating a business model which takes in paid-for work as well as original IP development The team seems simultaneously dazed by its success so far and genuinely optimistic about the future When we ask if this is a good time to get into the industry as a small developer, the answer is unequivocally positive

"With electronic distribution it's a brilliant time to start a game studio," says Williamson. "Steam, WiiWare PlayStation Network, Xbox Live Arcade. there are so many options for getting your game out to the public, and you're going to get the lion's share of the money plus, you get to keep the IP, which builds value in your company We didn't have a lot of money behind us In fact we didn't have any money behind us But we're still here two years later "

It's the survival of these startups that TerKeurst sees as his ongoing responsibility Dozens of new businesses, including several game developers, are up and running thanks to these initiatives The challenge is to keep them operating and – crucially keep them in the area "The strategic vision is that the universities are the engine driving the region," says TerKeurst "Over the next few years our ambition is to ensure the sustainability of companies as well as to combat stereotypes of the region and project the image of the north east as a cluster for digital companies." Regional stereotypes don't succumb easily, but if the north east is about to overthrow its erroneous status as a failing industrial centre, the revolution may well begin here.

EINHÄN

A shooter on the 'wrong' console at the wrong time from experience in the sector. Welcome to the madness of

The wail of an air-raid siren breaks the pitch-black silence of *Einhänder's* opening moments Before the lights fade up to reveal a futuristic spacecraft streaking sideways across another Blade Runner cityscape, a German voice speaks with robotic non-emotion: "Achtung!" At this point the reason for the alert is unclear but, to any gamer aware of the game's curious backstory, it's the last in a great many warning signs to precede this most unlikely of shoot 'em ups

Rarely has a pitch for a new game seemed so loaded with potential for ruin While recipes for disaster usually contain at least one good ingredient subsequently turned bad by the others, almost every raw component of Squaresoft's first and only horizontal shooter tasted of

catastrophe. As Japan's premier producer of roleplaying games, its stock lavish, expansive, narrative-laden epics are the antithesis to the scrolling arcade twitch fix. The techniques employed to compel a player into each type of game's depths are so dissimilar as to require entirely different rule-sets and design methodologies So that the company would choose to put its most talented RPG designers to work on a game in a genre of which almost none of them had any experience is nothing short of extraordinary And that the game turned out to be one of the finest examples of that genre defies belief

Hulking multi-part enemies fill the screen, their animations fluid, robust and believable. Understated night-time skies are stamped with the momentary brilliance of crooked branch lightning

and dark foreboding backgrounds add to the drama of the game's defiant, gigantic 3D objects and fearsome bosses. The camera wheels and dives, shifting viewpoint from sideways-on to three-quarter isometric angles, injecting each level with an exhilarating choreography of perspectives. Sometimes these views scroll through an area, forcing your play style to keep pace with game's tempo, then the next moment it locks still, enemies arriving in waves on your fixed location

At one point you'll battle a giant train-mounted cannon, taking the machinery apart piece by piece At the end of the encounter there's no screen-shaking explosion; your ship simply flies on past, leaving the train careering off in the other direction, wounded beyond all use This moment of giant-felling is then
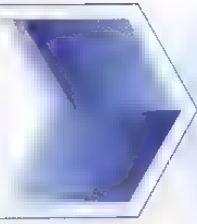
EINHÄNDER

an RPG developer with no prior
the Selene Special Attack Force
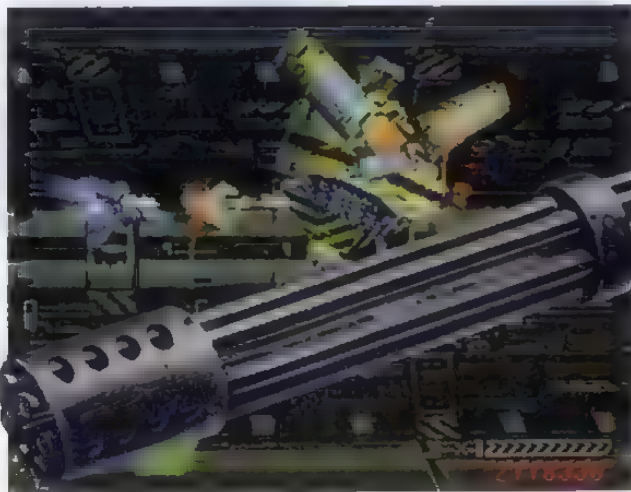
SQUARE PEGS AND ROUND HOLES

In the PlayStation's heyday, Squaresoft was known for its occasional forays into foreign design territory from the one-stab-and-it's-over semi-turn beat 'em up *Bushido Blade* to the *Tempest*-like internal *Section* but these side projects were mostly developed by out-of-house studios picked up by the software giant to broaden its publishing portfolio. But *Einhander's* creators were cherry-picked from heavyweight in-house projects such as *Final Fantasy VII, Parasite Eve, Secret Of Mana* and *Chrono Trigger*, charged with creating a white-knuckle twitch-shooter for a system outclassed in the genre by its arch rival, the Sega Saturn.

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render the game in sumptuous 3D (albeit with ship control running along traditional 2D planes) seemed to further put the project in jeopardy

One moment you're smashing through neon signs in a future city, the glass from each shattering into falling shards, the next you're descending vertically into the belly of a ruined underground city. Here, in the blackness long-tailed enemy droids flit from place to place, beams from their head-mounted search lamps groping through the murk for your craft like deep-sea anglerfish. Every scene in the game is tightly directed, its ideas clear and defined and its 3D execution rock solid.

Boss fights, while not as lengthy or complex as those encountered in *Radiant Silvergun*, enjoy similar traits. Flagged up by a haunting police siren, each end-of-eve enemy boasts multiple body parts that must be dismantled bit by bit for the

juxtaposed with an encounter with a fast and feisty tank, jumping from faraway layers of parallax into the foreground and then back out again, its rhythms calling to mind Treasure's finest work in defining safe and vulnerable enemy spaces within any given vista. From all this it's clear that Squaresoft had worked on Sony's machine more closely than almost any other third-party developer, and that the lessons learned from games such as *Final*

Some Gunpods function differently depending on whether they're on top of your ship or underneath it. One, the Wasp, fires powerful unguided rockets from one site, and weaker homing missiles from the other

Final Fantasy VII provided the bedrock on which Einhänder's towering graphical achievements, and nuanced, interesting storyline, were built

Fantasy VII provided the technical bedrock upon which *Einhänder*'s towering graphical achievements, and nuanced, interesting storyline, were built. Indeed the game stands today as a marvel of technical engineering and imaginative snowboating matched only by the marvel of the fact its creators were rookies working on a system largely shunned by other shoot 'em up makers.

While Sony's PlayStation had by the time of *Einhänder*'s release, already won the wider format war, its shoot 'em up losses to Sega's 2D powerhouse, the Saturn, were well known by all. The *DonPachi* games, *Battle Garegga*, *Soukyugurentai*, *Strikers 1945* and *Radiant Silvergun*, along with a raft of others, had long secured the Saturn's reputation as the genre's new-found promised land. The hardware's ability to deliver exquisite parallax scrolling, gigantic sprites and fiery 2D particle effects drew developers away from Sony's more mainstream, 3D-focused system. So Squaresoft's choice of platform, while no doubt dictated by contractual obligations to Sony, nevertheless went against the grain and the decision to

highest score bonuses, the promise of a time reward providing a trade-off choice between speed and completion. All of the game's robotic, mechanical enemies are animated with biological movements and characteristics. The fourth stage's mid-boss hoists itself out of a lake with long orangutan arms and, using the rafters as monkey bars, takes aim at your ship with its lizard-like tail, a primordial being frozen mid-evolution.

The game's story is unusually established for the genre and shows Squaresoft's natural bias toward narrative in gaming. Set in the distant future, *Einhänder* tells the tale of the war between a community of humans living in the moon colony of Selene and the remaining inhabitants of Earth. As a pilot in Selene's technologically advanced Special Attack Force, you must enter Earth's orbit on a suicide mission to gather intelligence and cause as much damage as possible while doing so. In between each level your bosses deliver instructions and encouragement, only for their true motives to be revealed in the game's final moments. Your penultimate task is to take down an enemy shuttle on a crash

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Einhander's score mechanic rewards swift, sequential kills with up to a 16x score multiplier. This introduces pacing strategy, benefiting the players who regulate their kills in order to maintain the highest multiplier
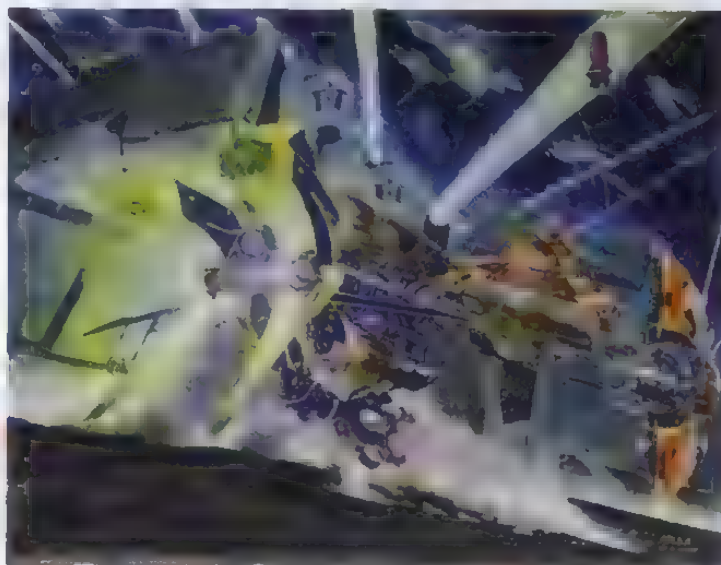
course with the moon. This climactic section heightens the intensity of the music, story and action to a thunderous, against-the-clock finish. Successfully achieve your goal and you overhear the order for a friendly squadron to eliminate your ship. The game's memorable finish consists of a bombastic fight in space against your former commanders, those who have controlled your destiny through the game thus far

Einhänder takes its name from the

more offensive ammunition. The eight core Gunpods used in the game (four secret ones exist) are well balanced, and choosing the right tool for the job is of paramount importance. This has led to the game earning criticism from some quarters, in order to fully succeed, patterns must be learned and optimum Gunpod set-ups experimented with. But this refinement of technique is no different to the path-taking routines bullet hell players wrestle with when aiming for high scores.

later in the game, the pulse is overlaid with a mangled rap. As such, the soundtrack avoids the cliché of the techno videogame score, providing quiet openings in the music, space and understated ambient drama to add interest and urgency

To add replay value to the game Squaresoft included three hidden bonuses to each level, the criteria for unlocking each one left unspecified and secret. These clandestine tasks are creative requiring the player to approach the game in unusual ways reminiscent of the more imaginative Achievement challenges on modern consoles. This deep sublevel to the game, obscured to all but the most dedicated, demonstrates the competence and comprehensiveness of Squaresoft's approach to this horizontal shooter. While everything could have and indeed should have gone wrong, the project's team performed an incredible feat of design and execution, crafting a game whose form and function rivals and surpasses almost all of the inspirations its creators must have studied so closely during its creation. Following the game's release, Einhänder's team members were split up and redeployed to more orthodox and traditional in-house projects, leaving the company's bright and brilliant excursion in the horizontal shoot 'em up a singular and spectacular curio never, sadly, to be revisited.

The memorable finish consists of a bombastic fight in space against your former commanders, those who've controlled your destiny thus far

mechanism that hangs at the bottom of your ship, a grappling arm that allows you to attach different weapons in traditional shoot 'em up style. In typical Squaresoft fashion, however, the abstract, unorthodox principle of Einhänder's weapon pick-up system had to be explained in narrative terms and, as such, the grappling arm that attaches Gunpod pick-ups (any of which can be stolen from downed foes) takes its own place in the interactive toolset. Weapons have limited usage, a brave decision that introduces an element of resource management to the twitch frenzy and, when expired, the manipulator arm can be used to attack enemies and deflect small bullets in lieu of

Ironically, the person on the development team with the most experience working on shoot 'em ups had nothing to do with the design or realisation of actual mechanics employed by the game. Kenichiro Fukui, Einhänder's composer, had been a previous employee of Konami where he'd worked on genre staples such as Gradius 2, Sunset Riders and Xexex. Einhänder's score, being primarily techno-based, is unusual for the Squaresoft of the time. However, its electronic bedrock is personalised by elements taken from other musical styles. In the first level the four-to-the-floor thump of a bass drum is tempered by an operatic diva's trembling melisma and

I SAW
THREE SHIPS

Emmander's three basic ships behave in surprisingly diverse ways. The Astraea FGA Mk I can equip two Gunpods at the same time, each of which can be fired separately or simultaneously. The Endymion FRS Mk I can pack three Gunpods allowing the player to hoard gun types appropriate to different situations. Squaresoft balances this fighter by lowering the amount of ammunition each gun carries. Finally, the Endymion FRS Mk III, a tough ship to succeed with can carry only one Gunpod at a time. To redress this disadvantage it also carries a double machine gun with unlimited ammunition. Two additional fighter planes can be unlocked if certain criteria are met during play. Both of these ships are enemy fighters, one of which is a stock drone right from the beginning of the game. This ship dubbed the Sodom in the Japanese version carries a machine gun whose rate of fire is directly linked to your current score multiplier.

One mid-boss, affectionately known as Ausf De Gestell, is modelled after a crazed gorilla, beating its robotic chest and somersaulting around before hurling boxes in an homage to Donkey Kong's fury

THE MAKING OF...
EARTHWORM JIM

The unlikeliest mascot for gutsy videogame development: a spineless hero in a borrowed suit

Nothing says 'all bets are off' quite like the flight of a bewildered cow, shot from a tree branch by a worm and a falling fridge. All right, planets made of phlegm come close, as do an evil cat named Evil The Cat, a fight with a blind dinosaur and an instruction to whip rabid dogs with your own head. But that's it. That, and the time **David Perry** took a man from Hong Kong to dinner and asked him for millions of dollars. "I was so naïve," he laughs now. "I'd have probably woken up next to a horse's head if I hadn't paid him back."

The man, who in all probability is actually a great lover of horses, was the head of toy giant Playmates which, in 1993, decided to make its first videogame. Perry, the hotshot programmer behind games like *Global Gladiators* (the award-winning McDonalds platformer) and Disney's *Aladdin* (made by "nine guys in 99 days" before grossing $120 million), was looking to split from Virgin Interactive, the company that had brought him to the US. "He goes 'All right, I'll lend you millions of dollars' And the deal was done."

Along with a war chest labelled Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, Playmates had a vast portfolio from which to pluck its game debut. The newly formed Shiny Entertainment,
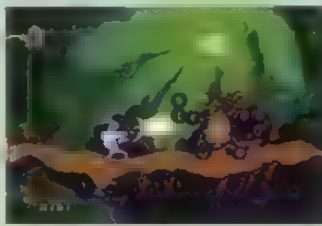
Attempts to rejuvenate *Earthworm Jim* on stronger hardware suggested that the game was far enough ahead of the curve to warrant more horsepower – and that no one knew what to do with the series
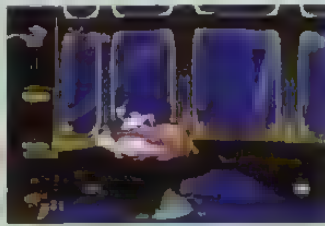
meanwhile, had a loyal "dream team" of British and American developers farmed from Perry's years at Virgin. "So we had this long, drawn-out conversation about Knight Rider games, toy car games, all kinds of stuff," he recalls. "But it was tough for the team because they wanted to do something original. And they kept going on about **Doug TenNapel**."

Now an Eisner Award-winning creator of shows like Nickelodeon's Catscratch, and games like cult '90s adventure *The Neverhood*, TenNapel was then animating a *Jurassic Park* game for Sega. Shiny's animation department was already talented, but more importantly was well-stocked,

there was, it seemed, little need for new recruits. So a challenge was laid down: if TenNapel could design a character that everyone agreed was 'cool', he was in.

"I had a bunch of college buddies and we had this inside joke that everyone was named Jim," TenNapel begins. "I've a brother called Jim. My best friend, Joe Potter, has a cousin

"So I create this superhero – a worm in a suit. I showed him to my wife and she said it was silly. That's when I knew he was perfect"

Jim. One of my heroes was my uncle Jim. And we had this borderline-insane friend – OK, socially retarded – and he would do these *really* bad Star Trek imitations of Bones. 'Jim. Jim. He's *dead*, Jim.'

"So I create this superhero – a worm in a suit. And this is a worm that's become a self-aware American, what else *could* I call him? Jim is this great name that says 'random humour' and 'American heroism' in just one word."

Studying the model sheets of old Looney Tunes characters, TenNapel borrowed an anatomical design trait from Chuck Jones, creator of Wile E Coyote and Road Runner: a contrast between thick and thin. "It was the worm that made the man – and his floppy head gave us animators something to do. I showed him to my wife and she said it was a silly idea. That's when I knew he was perfect."

TenNapel's frustrations with games led him back to non-interactive media, though his 1996 Claymation game *The Neverhood*, and 1998's *Skullmonkeys*, are still seen as champions of videogame adventure

Psy-Crow

Snott

WHACK!

MAJOR MUCUS
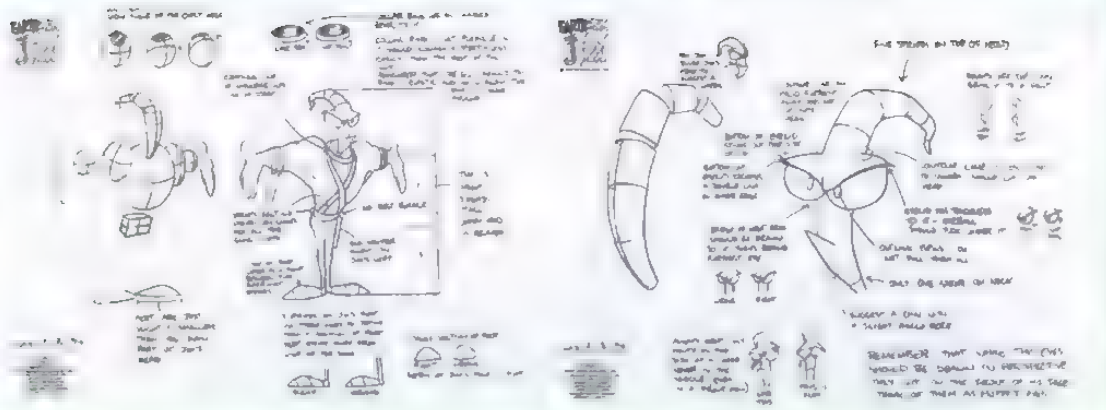
SEEING RED

Some of the fondest memories of *Earthworm Jim 2*, 1995's faithful sequel, are of its dreaded planet-of-paperwork level, ISO 9000. Full of possessed filing cabinets and masked lawyers, its only escape route was a door with legs that kept running away. Something to say, David? "At Virgin, they gave me a manager, a little guy with a shirt and tie," he explains. "And he wanted me to write down everything I was doing. I thought it'd be funny to write down a bunch of bullshit and see if he caught on – and he didn't. We'd sit down and he'd lecture me on not getting all this phoney garbage finished on time. So I lost all respect for him. Some ISO rule was behind all that, so we just had to fight back against The Man."

Spellbound, Perry saw in Earthworm Jim exactly what Playmates was looking for: games, toys and cartoons. Then he hit a snag. "Everyone who wants a television show and a toy line gets stuck in that Catch 22. They won't make a toy line unless you have a TV show; they won't make a TV show without a toy line. The secret to solving it – and this seems so bloody obvious now – was to get the heads of the two companies, Playmates and Universal, round the dinner table. And that was it – done."

The offers to license Jim merchandise, including bed sheets, stickers, lunchboxes, party hats and Halloween masks, came so fast that, in Perry's words, "the lawyer for the Turtles" had to step in. Playmates became so caught up in the momentum that it launched 17 projects with other developers. "They pulled out the cheque book. But it wasn't as easy as they thought and they ran into all sorts of problems."

A smart deal with Virgin meant Perry owned his engine, the publisher licensing it for games like *Robocop Versus Terminator*. While the fees flowed in for its use, its performance continued to improve. Perry's 'secret weapon' programmer Andy Astor, who passed away from cancer while making *Giants: Citizen Kabuto* in 2000, achieved high animation compression at unnaturally fast speeds. And luck, together with some dodgy Mega Drive development docs was also on Perry's side. "Those Japanese manuals were riddled with typos," he recalls. "Misinterpreting one of them, I sent data through the Genesis [the US Mega Drive] at twice the speed you're supposed to. And I was like 'Holy shit – it worked'."

It gave Shiny's artists an unusual luxury, especially for a 16bit format

chooses pixel colours you might not have picked, the edges becoming really smooth. So we ended up with these incredibly smooth animation lines.

In a real television show, you have this concept of laying out timesheets – reusing certain animations and putting hesitations on them. The animators thought this was a really big deal while I was like 'Whatever – you're just telling the code to hold frame for a couple of seconds'. At the time, animation in games was pretty simple, cycling through, say, frames one to eight over and over. Our animators were

"It started with him running. Then he had to jump. What could make him jump? Let's have a crazy dog bite him on the ass"

a surfeit of animation. And while other artists drew graphics straight into Deluxe Paint, *Earthworm Jim* was drawn with pencils, the artwork scanned, flood-filled and shrunk to create its sprites. "It was true digital ink painting, as if we were making a TV show," says Perry. "And when you scale stuff down using software, it

asking to hold on frame seven, then go back to frame six. They wanted timing and emotion."

In a studio where Tex Avery Laserdiscs 'played 24/7', Perry wanted *Earthworm Jim* to be cartoony, not childlike. "Those discs were inspirational," he says. "I learned so much about animation from the observations people would make, about the dramatic action, the overlapping action, the drapery movements, the over-exaggeration. People don't hit the ground in cartoons, they *overhit* the ground."

Shiny's designers and engineers were also banned from taking written notes into meetings. They had to sketch their ideas, no matter their artistic skill, turning the conference table into a gallery of 'dreadful' art. The result, insists Perry, was conversation, the direction of which became increasingly bizarre as the 'notes', often unintelligible, were misinterpreted. And as random ideas grew into unlikely mechanics, a realtime production method emerged.
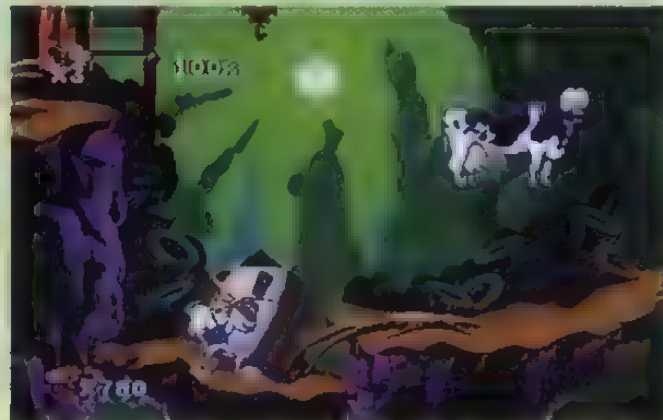
Would Jim have launched the cow had he known the consequences? It would take the whole of the game for the mooing missile to come back down – right on top of the heroine, Princess What's-Her-Name

EARTHWORM JIM

Doc Duodenum

Queen _Pulsating Bloated..._
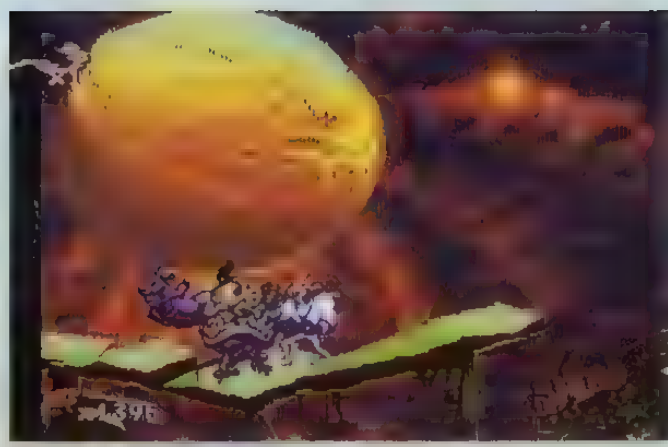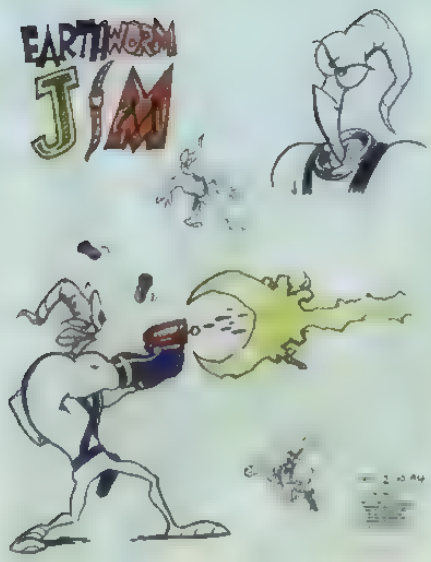
Above: work at Shiny ground to a halt when the diving pod stage became an impromptu time-trial contest Top: sidekick Peter Puppy was designed to save Jim from his own incompetence

"I'm so tired of people nowadays having every single screen, icon and moment scripted before they lift a frickin' mouse," says Perry through his teeth. "I look back at those days and think 'God, I wish it was still like that' Earthworm Jim had no design document – it just started with him running left and right Then he had to jump. What could we have that made him jump? Let's have a crazy dog bite him on the ass. We didn't even know what the next level was going to be And when you develop a game according to what's working, nothing's as it would have been had you written it down beforehand

Taking nothing away from the Shiny team, other members of which included veteran composer Tommy Ta arico, Jim owes much to the creative sparring of his chief designers TenNapel wanted a hero who was accidental almost calamitous, while Perry saw a muscleman, scrappy but able "That tug of war worked well but he lost one battle too many on the television show – everything he did was dumb." Some might say similar things about Earthworm Jim 3D, made by Scotland's Vis Entertainment and co-published by, of all companies Rockstar Games

TenNapel sighs "It sucked It's no one person's fault, but it just fell through the cracks and nobody was there to pick up the pieces and make it work And I don't disparage the team at all because it's hard to make and finish even a bad game But yeah, it's Jim in name only "

And they did a Game Boy version at Crave," says Perry "It was awful You'd think they'd have killed the brand with those games."

Still, the probability of Jim's return is, believes Perry, 100 per cent "It's difficult getting everyone back together – it's like herding cats But I do see it happening." And for those suffering déjà vu, that would indeed make it the second time in recent years In 2005, Perry approached Atari chairman Bruno Bonnel and embarked upon a 'Batman-esque' reboot with his original team You can probably guess what happened next

Bruno says later 'Actually, we've got some problems here with Atari We can't afford to fund this' And we'd already had our first design meetings – we were underway. It wasn't cool It was one of the reasons I finally threw the towel in "

And Earthworm Jim 4, recently announced by Interplay? "Well, technically, there is no real Interplay, it's just one person So that's more announcement than reality " Pigs, perhaps, not cows, may have to fly before you see that one.

SNOT A PROBLEM
Recent interviews with both TenNapel (above, seated next to Perry) and Shiny's founder, at least when the subject is each other, speak of reconciliation. What was the falling out? "When everything went 3D, I was bleeding money," admits Perry. "So I sold [Shiny] to Interplay. I'd built what I thought was a kickass 2D company that was kinda redundant. Then Andy Astor writes the entire MDK engine from scratch, we do 52 OEM licensing deals and make millions and millions of dollars. So the guys were pissed at me. It was a bonehead decision, I realise that. But no one else was sitting in my chair." "I was young, impatient, unsympathetic and afraid of losing control of my character," says TenNapel. "Dave's a great guy, provided me a generous opportunity, and in hindsight I can say that my time working for him was time well spent. Plus, how many companies of eight people have two guys that are six foot eight? Maybe there wasn't room for the two of us in such a small space."
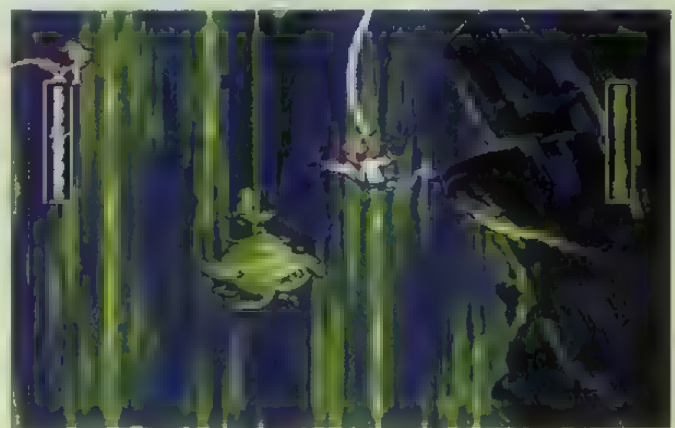
Far too debonair to use a string of snot as a bungie cord, Jim would nonetheless stoop to hijacking an old lady's stairlift and riding a hamster This bogie battle was, for no clear reason, a three round bout

Codeshop

The making of a hero

How one of the oldest online game developers ended up with the newest online game creation middleware

When it comes to massively multiplayer online games, numbers matter; that's why every month Blizzard batters the industry with another missive concerning the new Chinese hordes who have signed up for *World Of WarCraft*. But volume isn't the only measure of success. Longevity demonstrates quality too. So if, for example, you'd been running a company that had been making MMOGs for 20 years, and one which still has its first text-based MUD in commercial deployment, you'd have every right to feel equally proud of your online success, despite your lack of virtual Sino warriors.

Welcome to the world of Simutronics Corp and its founder and CEO, **David Whatley**. Starting out in 1987, the US-based developer worked with early partners such as AOL and CompuServe before launching its own Play.net portal, while the long-serving MUD is *GemStone*

www.heroengine.com

IV, which was released in 1988, and remains available for wordy Dungeons & Dragons fans on a $15-per-month basis. But impressive as this all is, it's not sufficient, in and of itself, to allow Whatley to grace the pages of Codeshop. The key to this appearance is the company's online game development technology, HeroEngine.

"We started working on HeroEngine because we had a game development project that needed this kind of technology and there was nothing out there that would do what we wanted," Whatley explains of the process that transformed the online game development company into an online game middleware development company. "When we showed other people the toolset we had built, they were beating our door down asking to license it."

One of the loudest of those door beaters was BioWare, which is using
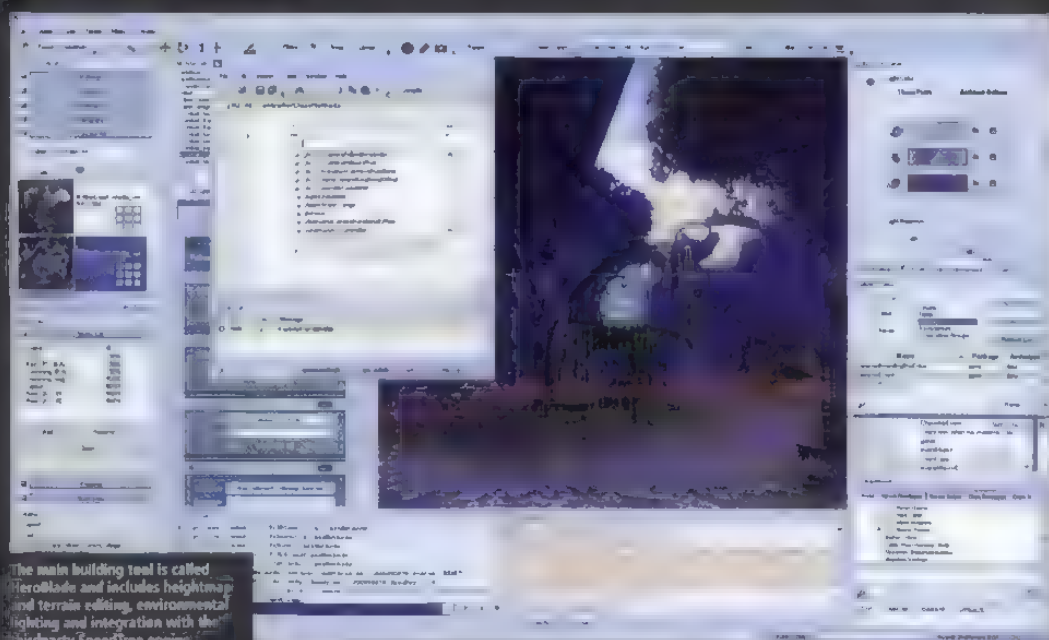
The main building tool is called HeroBlade and includes heightmap and terrain editing, environmental lighting and integration with the thirdparty SpeedTree engine

HERO engine

heroengine.com

HeroEngine's layering system can support up to 256 textures in each of the four layers used for the surface

The key features of HeroEngine are that it provides a live collaborative environment for game development and testing. The images on this page show how the process works with three people operating in the same system
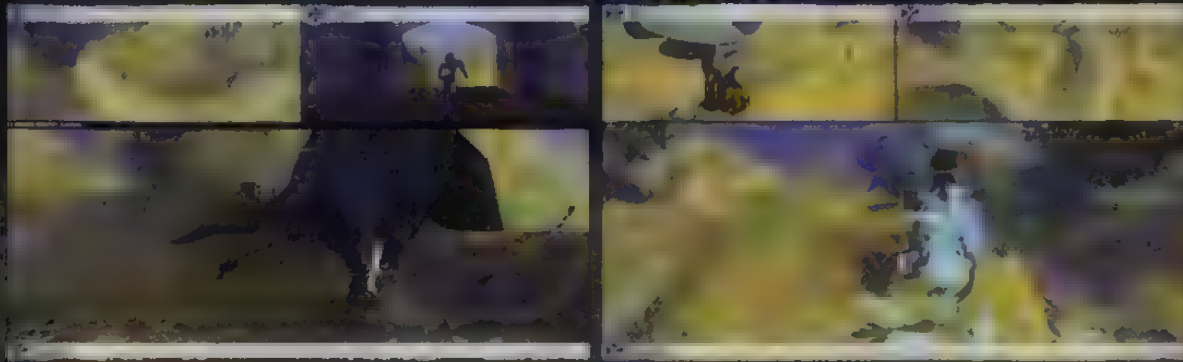
HeroEngine for an as-yet-unannounced game out of its Austin studio. "The engine is being used for some of the top titles in the MMO space," adds Simutronics' executive vice president Neil Harris. "As well as BioWare, we have ZeniMax [parent company to Bethesda] and a couple of ones we can't talk about yet. These are large-scale projects with multi-year development cycles and multiple million-dollar budgets to match."

Indeed, despite only having been available for a couple of years, Simutronics is already positioning HeroEngine as the Unreal Engine of online game development. "We think we're the highest-end MMOG engine out there, we provide the highest-end capabilities, and we have the most engineers working to keep it ahead of the competition," Harris says. And that's also the reason HeroEngine comes with an Unreal 3-sized pricetag attached.

Enough of history and business, though. What's HeroEngine really about? It's very different to other online engines out there. It's a whole new development

paradigm," Harris begins to explain. Uhoon, he said 'paradigm'.

"It's an overused word but in this case it's true," says Whatley, taking up the story. "The traditional development methodology for online games is you're working in your own little sandbox area of the whole game environment so what you do doesn't affect anyone else until you merge your changes with the main codebase. The benefits are you can work separately and you're not going to screw up anyone else's work until you merge. With HeroEngine, everyone works within the same live, collaborative environment no matter where in the world they're

based, and all changes made are immediately saved into the system.

"The advantage is that, unlike traditional development, people don't have to stop their work when the code goes through a build and compile cycle. You just don't do that with HeroEngine. All development is done live on the server, which greatly accelerates your ability to develop a game, especially during the prototyping phase. That's the paradigm shift."

As an example, Whately says level designers can play within their game and immediately go into edit mode and move things around. Normally this would break the pathfinding system, requiring a new navigation mesh to be calculated and baked on to the environment – a time-consuming

process. HeroEngine can dynamically update the pathfinding using a micro-update system that's run off the server technology and patching in any required changes however they're needed.

Of course, such advantages always come with disadvantages attached, and in the case of HeroEngine, it can take some time for potential clients to get their heads around how they should be making the most of its flexibility. "We do a lot of work in the sales and training process to undo people's expectations concerning problems of online game development that they believe to be inherent," explains Harris.

> "The advantage is that people don't have to stop work when code goes through a build and compile cycle"

Apart from this, however, the only downside to the increasing popularity of HeroEngine has been the impact on Hero's Journey, which was the game Simutronics originally created HeroEngine to make. Development started in the early 2000s but there's no release date currently scheduled. "We're a small company so we've had to shift resources and focus on the engine, so while our game has been in development for two to three years under HeroEngine, nothing's quite got out of the door yet," Harris reveals.

But if that's the only tall the hero's taken, it looks like Whately and Simutronics' success in online games should be continuing for plenty of years to come.

Why it's hard to blow things up online

While the collaborative and live aspects of HeroEngine are a main selling point, you don't have to dig too far into the technology's features to get an idea why it took Simutronics five years to come up with a fully functioning system. One example currently being worked on is how to implement a fully destructive environment within the live development environment; something that will involve synchronising dynamic changes in geometry, physics, navigation and AI both on the game client and the game server.

"The server keeps track of the state of the world in the same way that the client does as the codepaths are identical, but with destructible worlds the server needs to be able to keep track of all the changes, which in the case of running networked physics that can deal with client latency is a big issue," says Whatley.

"And even when we implement this on the server, it will be ultimately meaningless if the AI can't then find its way around in this potentially ever-changing world. There are a lot of different technologies that all have to work together, but I think within eight to 12 months, we'll have fully destructible worlds within HeroEngine."

Linked into this sort of problem is the issue that every system in HeroEngine has to work in the same always-live, collaborative manner. This has proved significant in terms of some of the thirdparty tools, such as Audiokinetic's Wwise audio engine, that Simutronics has integrated in HeroEngine. "We're driving a lot of the middleware providers to re-architect the way their technology works because we have a hardcore requirement that whatever we implement has to work with dynamic updates," Whatley explains.

Studio profile

Like Top Trumps, but for game dev

- **COMPANY NAME:** Streamline Studios B.V.

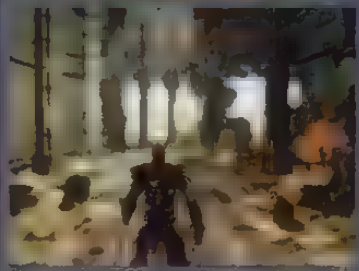- **DATE FOUNDED:** 2001

- **NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES:** 60

- **KEY STAFF:** (Below, from left) Jeroen Leurs (senior artist),

Fernandez (VP business development), Mike Shurtleff (technology architect; not photographed)

- **URL:** www.streamline-studios.com

- **PREVIOUS PROJECTS:**

- **LOCATION:** Amsterdam, The Netherlands

- **CURRENT PROJECTS:** Various undisclosed 'next-gen' projects

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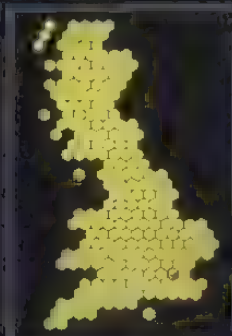
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■ **INSIDE VIEW: ESTHER SAUER** COURSE MULTIMEDIA ARTS BA

"After completing my diploma in graphic and communication design in Germany I was looking for some further studies to achieve an international BA Degree.

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"Studying at Qantm means studying in small groups with high-quality equipment and personal contact with all staff, as well as knowledge exchange with students from all around the world.

"The course structure allows free time for you to work, if you have a good sense of time management.

"Whilst the first year is very practical and leaves a lot of space for creative approaches and ideas for the individual projects, theory and written assignments are the rule throughout the second year.

"I personally like the concept that all of the different streams – gaming, 3D, animation and multimedia – are lectured together but with stream-specific lectures included as part of the standard timetable. This allows us to gain a bit of insight into topics and fields we otherwise wouldn't know too much about.

"In the end it really is quite close to a real working environment, where people with different areas of expertise work together.

"Qantm also offers work experience within the college as well as outside it. There are quite a few students that work for the college during their studies, allowing them to gain a really in-depth knowledge of the industry from numerous angles. I got involved with the administrative and marketing side, and loved how it broadened the scope of my potential work.

"Overall, I think Qantm is an internationally recognised, quality educator. If you're able to put 110 per cent into the course you'll get everything and more back out of it!"

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How many lessons is it possible to learn from a game one no longer plays? A few months back, in this very space, I used EA Sports' *Madden NFL* series to argue that videogame developers need to radically rethink their doctrinaire approaches to challenge, progression and reward. But why is *Madden* so hard to learn?

Even more befuddling, why is it so difficult to get back into after a long layoff? After all, while the actual game of football is fairly complicated, it doesn't change much from season to season. But therein, perhaps, lies the key to why EA's signature American sports series is so inaccessible. At Ziff-Davis' recent Electronic Gaming Summit, EA Sports president Peter Moore gave a presentation entitled 'EA Sports: How Are We Going to Stay In the Game?' During his talk, he put up a slide displaying his division's key tenets

And while some of these will be pulled from subsequent versions, many will remain intact. So what is the net effect of innovation upon innovation upon innovation? Complexity

In other words, EA Sports is a prisoner of its business model, a phenomenon that I call the tyranny of the $60 game. Even though *Madden NFL* is an extremely successful franchise, the barrier to entry (and re-entry) is inadvertently and artificially nudged higher every year in order to push you into buying it. And resistance is futile because of the network effect: if you opt out of the latest version while your friends cave in and buy it, you're cut off from playing with them. During the Q&A portion of Moore's session, I asked him how he intended to tackle the compounding difficulty of EA Sports titles; he answered that each of his studios planned to incorporate both adaptive AI and a mentoring system into their games. But I'm skeptical that

make the game more complex. Instead, the *Madden* team can focus on making smaller, more evolutionary changes to the service around the core gameplay, building a strong social network to take advantage of the fact that so many people buy the title; and moving more radical changes to a longer cycle.

Another publisher that ought to explore these possibilities is Activision with its *Call Of Duty* franchise. The most recent game in the series, Infinity Ward's *Call Of Duty 4: Modern Warfare*, has sold more than ten million copies worldwide, moving it into the top ranks of videogame IPs. So far, there's been one map pack released, but from conversations I've had with people close to Activision it's not clear how much longer the publisher and the developer will support *COD4* with DLC after *World At War* ships. This makes no sense for a game that has effectively become *Counter-Strike* for consoles — especially given that *COD4* is set in modern times, while the forthcoming game takes place during World War II [see page 36]

If Activision and Infinity Ward were to think of *COD4*'s online following as a community rather than as an audience, it would likely send them in a direction that's closer to what Valve is doing with *Team Fortress 2*'s regular flow of content updates — each of which only adds to the perceived value of the base game — rather than what EA Sports is currently doing with *Madden*. While I have no doubt that some *COD4* players will at least temporarily decamp for the new title, the sheer size of *COD4*'s playerbase almost guarantees that its community will remain active for a long time, and it deserves to be taken care of until the next *Modern Warfare* ships, at the very least. It's high time that the tyranny of the $60 boxed product was overthrown. Who will be the next to rebel?

N'Gai Croal writes about technology for Newsweek. His blog can be found at blog.newsweek.com/blogs/levelup

> ## What is the net effect of innovation stacked upon innovation upon innovation? Complexity. EA is a prisoner of its business model

• Capturing our CORE with breakthrough innovation

• Expanding our BRAND with Wii exclusive experiences

• Captivating the MASSES with the new EA Sports Freestyle launch

Again, why is breakthrough innovation necessary in a sport that is largely the same year after year? It's because EA is trying to convince you to buy the same game year after year. Without these innovations, they'd have to persuade you to spend $60 for roster updates and new box art, which is a tough sell. As a result, *Madden NFL 2009* will boast several feature innovations, followed by *Madden NFL 2010*, followed by *Madden NFL 2011*, and so on

either one is anything more than a Band-Aid that doesn't really address the root cause.

So if the EA Sports business model is pushing the development team in the wrong direction, why not change the business model for *Madden NFL* from a $60 disc to a $40 disc or download with a $2 monthly subscription? Or give the base game away for free, but with a $5 monthly subscription? I'm sure EA's number crunchers will crunch the numbers, then tell me why I'm full of it — and they might be right on the financials, to say nothing of the risk. But my point is that by switching to a monthly subscription model, EA Sports' relationship to its customer will change to one that no longer requires large-scale annual innovations that
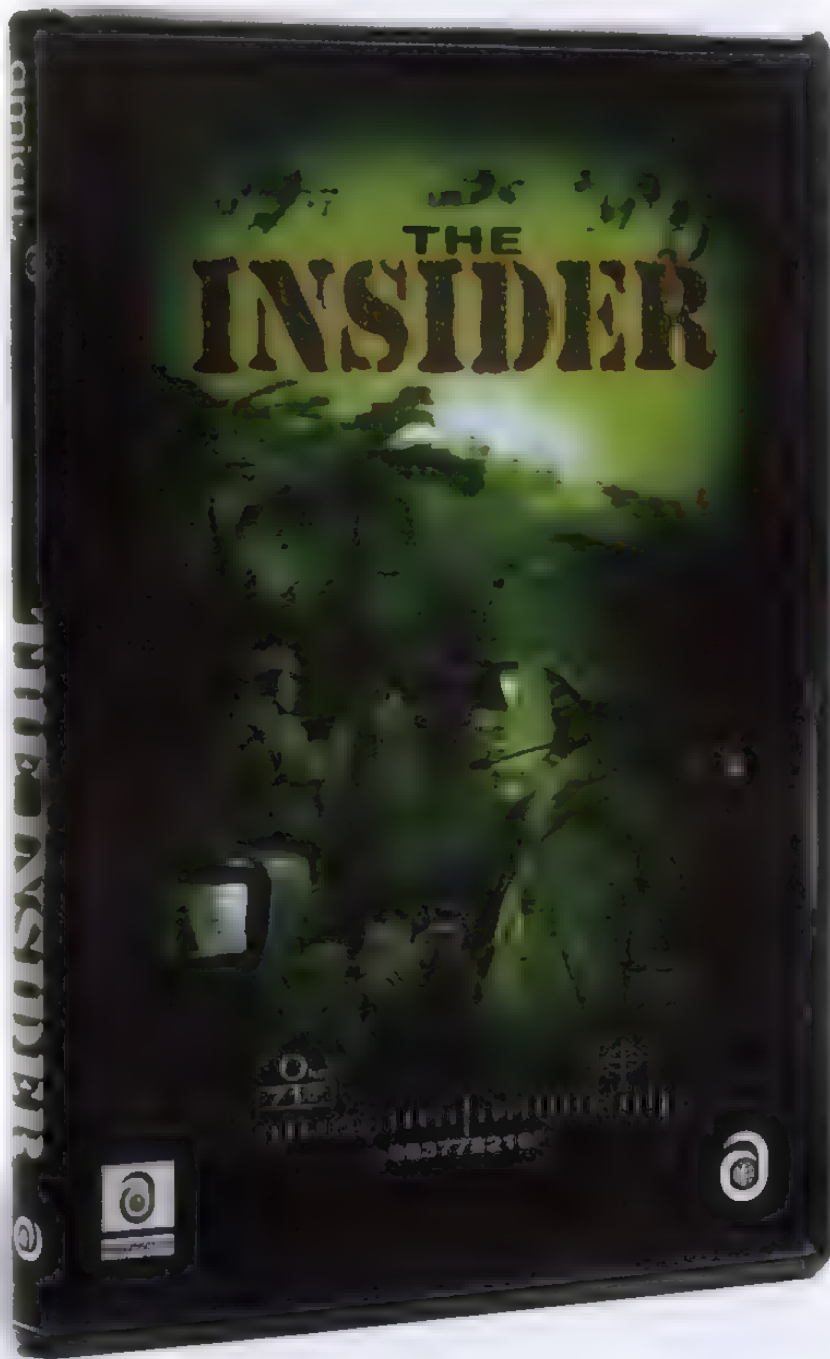
Out there in the field, your skills get sharper all the time You work hard for your company. But you have an equally important mission: to progress your career Everyone needs more opportunities to showcase their talent, work on bigger and better titles – to be recognised in the industry. So even if you're not looking to make a move right now, join the elite group that is our talent network. You'll see roles no-one else can, courtesy of our advanced technology.

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Picture this: a game about saving people from themselves. There's an evil, churning black hole and, as more innocents are drawn into it, its power to suck grows. To rescue them you have to build things for them to explore, like abandoned towers with lights in the topmost windows, trash-planets where robot ecologies evolve naturally, enormous spell books that really work, and antique maps that seem to prove the local folklore is true. One day you realise it's not a videogame, it's reality.

What do you believe in that you've never seen or touched? I don't just mean centaurs either, because everyone believes in those. More like parabolas, mothers lifting cars off their pinned children, the future, or that undeniable force that makes people cry at weddings. What can you see that isn't really there? This one time I was an explorer on the frontiers of outer

stuff about terrain, wind, and atmospheric conditions from the text of the orbital scan.

In that sense, playing the 1986 classic *Starflight* was like reading a book, at least in the way it led my imagination to fill in the details. Literature has the best graphics of any medium, because it taps the reader's mental library of pictures and guides them to create imagery which suits them perfectly. Like most kids, my life was full of imagined adventures. I would read stories and act out new chapters with action figures. I was in love with these epic, tacky paintings of spaceships, and I used to draw up schematics describing their lasers and missiles and what every button on the dashboard would do. I would miss the bus by getting deeply drawn into treasure maps on the back of Cap'n Crunch boxes.

Imagination is a fascinating process, an invitation to creative participation, an overlap

There's this famous anecdote about the mechanical shark on the set of Jaws functioning abysmally because it wasn't tested underwater or some similar operating condition that the engineers couldn't possibly have predicted, so Spielberg padded out the shark attacks, the very core of the film, with suspenseful hints and reaction shots. People tend to agree that this reserved approach made the movie scarier, and if no one would swim for months afterwards it was not due to gory, full-frontal shark robotics but rather all the negative space around them. Somehow, everything the film omitted wound up in the murky depths beneath the audience's kicking legs.

How do these media make such effective use of imagination? They show contours without filling in every detail, and guide the audience into their creations. They present mysteries that aren't yet decoded, worlds that aren't fully explored, and hang prizes just out of reach.

Did you know for the first time in modern history less than half of America's adult population reads literature? That's another joke for the world to laugh at us about along with the voting irregularities, but it's distressing when you're from here. One of the most fundamental art forms is becoming neglected. What's more, the National Education Association correlates the decline in reading to a decline in civic participation, including volunteering, political involvement, visiting museums and attending sports. There's more than a hint of accusation in the report directed towards TV, the internet and videogames for fostering short attention spans and instant gratification at the expense of active mental engagement. People are increasingly falling away from books and landing in the hands of games. What type of home do we imagine we're building for them?

> ## Literature has the best graphics of any medium, because it taps the reader's mental library of pictures and guides them to create imagery

space. I'd land on scorched moons to fill up my ship's hold with rare minerals or patrol lush planets in search of animal specimens. It was lonely work until I stumbled across a genuinely staggering discovery: a temple created centuries ago by sentient beings. I saw the decaying ruins in great detail, with the jungle floor long since having reclaimed the base of the gleaming pyramid. But for that matter I also remember being perched on craggy peaks overlooking ammonia oceans and being blasted by thousand-mile-an-hour winds while the robotic arm of my craft picked up rust-coloured crystals. None of this really existed, though. The Commodore 64 sprites contained less information than this paragraph does, and I had to project in all that

between faith and prediction, a dream or a poem come to life. Since it allows you to see things that don't exist yet, it's a prerequisite to creative ability. Since it reflects your belief in magic, it means you're alive. Since it causes you to wonder, question, and see from alternate perspectives, it develops your ethics.
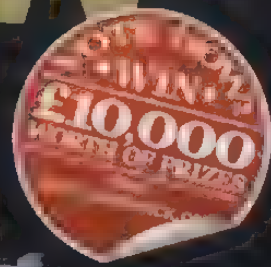
Film has such a strong emphasis on the 'show, don't tell' visual reveal that it seems prone to discouraging imagination, but there is clearly an art to leaving those openings. For instance, were the Clone Wars and the Jedi exterminations already cool enough when all you had to go on was the throwaway dialogue in Episode IV? Have you edited out the concept of Midi-Clorians from your view of the Force?

Randy Smith is a lead game designer at EA's LA studio. His current project is a collaboration with Steven Spielberg

Inbox

Having written before on the place of frustrating game design in today's industry, I was intrigued by the recommendation to read your Alone In The Dark article [E189]. What I found, however, offered a sense of both satisfaction and concern.

First of all, it is excellent to see developers trying something new in terms of game presentation and design. It sounds as if Eden Games is offering something rarely seen in the industry recently outside of Nintendo's offices – innovation. What concerns me,

No Deal scripting the next series of 24.

If Alone In The Dark stands alone as a novel and involving adrenaline shot of a game, then that is a fantastic addition to the market. If other developers rush to jump on this bandwagon and follow Nintendo's success in appealing to a mass market of low-attention-span gamers, then I fear the industry will suffer.

Frustrating elements in a game should be carefully overcome with clever and rewarding level design, or perhaps by leaving more difficult

I am excited to see a new style of gaming, and the idea of being immersed in a serialised drama is very appealing – who doesn't want to be Jack Bauer?

however, is that other developers could take this as a dangerous leaf out of Nintendo's book.

Yes, I am excited to see a new style of gaming, and the idea of being immersed in the tension of a well-scripted serialised drama is very appealing – who doesn't want to be Jack Bauer? The idea of eliminating frustration in favour of maintaining tension and pacing is certainly a positive move if applied with care. The problem I noted, however, is that by offering gamers the DVD scene selection approach to playing they are bringing the Wii's pick-up-and-play ethos to the more serious gaming market.

Now, don't get me wrong. I think the Wii is fantastic, and its ability to appeal to a mass audience by sheer accessibility is excellent for the industry – but it is not for everyone. Instant, mindless gratification is an excellent way to pass the time, and certainly has its place in gaming, but I wouldn't want the creators of Deal Or

challenges to a subquest. Including a fast-forward button encourages lazy level design and potentially means missing out on the overall experience. I am all for new approaches to gaming, but with Wii Sports and Wii Play taking up far more time in people's disc drives than say, Shadow Of The Colossus, I am afraid that the desire to make money will be a little more compelling than creative integrity.
Jon Awdie

On the other hand, perhaps AITD's scene-skip put pressure on its level designers to ensure players didn't just jump through it? As you say, though, it'll certainly be interesting to see how other developers are informed by Eden's brave experiment. As for Wii Sports not standing up as something with creative integrity, well, we can't let you get away with that one

Following on from the reader image on p159 of Edge 188, I thought you might enjoy this cloud,

from our real-time clouds middleware, details on request
**Roderick Kennedy,
Simul Software Ltd**

Well, it's clearly cheating, but since you can never have too many realistic-looking clouds in games, we'll let it go.

Do Sam Houser and the rest of Rockstar really dislike women as much as they appear to?

Yes, the irony is flowing thick and fast. Yes, Kate is portrayed as a 'saint' by Packie. Yes, the overblown judge on KNTT is clearly ridiculous. Yes, the world being depicted is not one that I should necessarily like, with nasty gangsters and slimeballs of the highest calibre. Yet I find myself quickly growing weary of the relentless abuse of females throughout the game. When every other cab driver tells you he is going home to 'beat up the coochie' and with pretty much every female character bar Kate being referred to or graphically depicted as a 'bitch', a 'whore', a 'slut' or simply a stripper I wouldn't even want to begin counting the times these words are heard while playing GTAIV. I didn't buy and have no interest in Saints Row almost entirely because the pimp-and-ho world it was selling had absolutely no

appeal to me whatsoever, and which *San Andreas* came dangerously close to with its pimping missions in Los Santos. *GTAIV* steered itself away from this aspect, thankfully, but sexism still clearly permeates the lovingly crafted and undeniably detailed *GTAIV* gameworld.

Ten out of ten, says **Edge**. A great game it is, no question. Niko is a fantastic lead. The physics are astounding and add new layers of slapstick comedy and believability. Overall, no other game this year has made me belly-laugh so frequently. As you can tell I clearly do love *GTAIV* – however, I believe that if videogames are ever going to move beyond the oft-cited 'teenage, masculine, militarised' videogaming culture, then the consistent denigration of women should not really be one of the aspects that we should continue to harbour.

Honestly, the word 'whore' is not one that I use on a regular basis.

The word 'whore' is not one that I use on a regular basis. Neither do I wish to. I am not a pimp. I don't want to be a pimp. I do not think pimps are cool

Neither do I wish to. I am not a pimp. I don't want to be a pimp. I do not think pimps are cool.
Ben Wood

Do we actually have any readers who *do* want to be pimps? What a concept.

Much of the fulmination on the subject of artistic merit in videogames cites a familiar range of standard-bearers for the medium: *Shadow Of The Colossus*, *Okami*, *BioShock*, *Half-Life 2*, the *Final Fantasy* series, and so forth. Endless comparisons are drawn between these games and other artforms – does *Half-Life 2* more vividly portray hardship and brutal violence in an oppressive, childless dystopia than, say, Alfonso Cuarón's film Children Of Men? Is Ivalice a more compelling fantasy than Middle-earth, in either literary or cinematic guise? Without wishing to rehash the narratology/ludology debate, I'd suggest that an alternative comparison may also be instructive. In science and mathematics the notion that an idea or system can be assessed on its aesthetic quality is a familiar one (for anyone to whom this seems implausible, I'd recommend George Johnson's book The Ten Most Beautiful Experiments) and I would argue that this concept can also be invoked to judge artistic merit in gameplay concepts.

We're all familiar with some of the best examples of what I'd describe as a beautiful idea in gaming terms: for

I am really quite perturbed by it and may well avoid it by pulling out my ethernet cable when I play one of these EA games. It just seems to me they are taking the mick with this avenue of revenue – but hey, that's capitalism.

What would people prefer out of these two, very real-world examples? Advertising in some videogames or all videogames retailing at a pricepoint at least £10 higher than the current norm?

I don't mind ads in place. I just don't want my system sending EA my browsing habits from my PS3 or game data in order to change the in-game ads.

Well, I'd suggest you read those exciting EULAs before you agree to them. You might find yourself pro-actively permitting precisely that sort of activity and have only yourself to blame for blindly agreeing to it in the first place.

I wouldn't have any trouble wandering around Liberty City and spotting something I might like on a billboard. After all, I don't need to stare at it, and billboards in cities are perfectly normal things. I wouldn't like seeing a current advert spuriously appearing on a smashed billboard in the middle of a game of *Halo* though, because it would rather spoil the immersion.

I wonder how those bleating about in-game advertising would feel about advertising and sponsorship being removed from every other area of their lives. Would you pay a subscription for every TV channel that is currently free? Would you pay more for your season ticket for your footie team if the banner ads were removed from pitches? Would you pay £50 for an advert-free copy of Edge? Advertising is already subsidising virtually all your pastimes. Games are no different.

example, the two-weapon limit in *Halo* or the Gambits system in *FFXII*. The analogy with many of the most pleasing scientific discoveries is compelling: these concepts may seem obvious with hindsight, but they are in fact ingenious solutions to long-standing problems (these two ideas both elegantly resolve redundancy, respectively of weaponry and of commands). An idea needn't necessarily become ubiquitous to be beautiful, though. The boost chaining in *Burnout 2* – which allows extreme speed for as long as your nerve holds – is a beautiful example of a risk/reward system, and the pros and cons of discarding this mechanic in the subsequent series entry has been discussed in your pages before now. I'd propose that the Force in the *R Type* series is also a beautiful concept, which immediately introduces a fascinating extra tactical layer; any gamer will doubtless be able to think of dozens more.

Of course, good ideas in videogame design are generally critically recognised as such, not least by your noble publication. I think, though, that this aspect of criticism deserves considerably more emphasis than it currently receives – after all, gameplay is at the heart of what makes videogames different from passive media and, as such, a wider recognition of the aesthetics of gameplay design must surely play an important role in establishing the unique voice of gaming as an artform.
Peter Hewitt

What's tricky, of course, is getting others to pick up on such things. How can they understand the beauty in *Final Fantasy VII*'s Materia system when all they'll see are its damp theatrics and banal menus? Have

In *Alone In The Dark*, as Jon Awdie believes, going to bring out bad habits in developers? And should 'serious' gaming be the preserve of a minority that already understands it?

Have you grown the **Edge** logo in tulips, or had it appear on your morning toast? Pics to the usual address could end up here, just like Roderick Kennedy's Simul Clouds-powered arrangement

a DS to remind yourself of *Advance Wars*' battle tactics or *Puzzle Quest*'s blend of puzzle and RPG

I would like to say thank you. Thank you for the erudite article Big Unfriendly Giants in E188. Although what it contained will be familiar to many gamers, it did give me a little solace and reaffirmation that I am not alone in my toil.

I've been a game fanatic since the ST and Amiga days, and through these years my tastes have developed and refined. Games today bring a whole new world of realism and diversity, and it's now possible to immerse yourself like never before. However, when you're engrossed in the gameworld this much, it becomes a lot harder to take when it craps on you from a great height.

Rage Punch, Pad Slam, Angry Wrestler — I've mastered all of them and more. My 360 pad exited this Earth via a door frame and a particularly

galling defeat at *Dead Or Alive 4*, though there have been many others. In fact, I am at such a juncture. My foe? Ares, the god of war. I sit back on the sofa, every sinew contorted in rage as I look upon the battered and broken husk that was once Kratos, the ghost of Sparta. The gods stare down from Mount Olympus, laughing at my futile efforts. Yet again. The words 'You are dead' have been seen so many times over the last hour that my TV is risking burn-in. That's when it then gives me its final humiliation: 'Would you like to lower the difficulty?'

Cue more anger and language of a type that would make many a builder blush, followed by an ill-advised and over-eager attempt to prove the game wrong. I swear I saw it smirk! The strange thing is that after the rage has subsided, all I'm left with is shame. Shame that I've let it get to me, that I've invested so much time and effort into something so — in the great

scheme of things — meaningless

Logic would dictate that I should leave it and move on, because when all's said and done, I've made it through *God Of War*. All I'd miss would be another plush cutscene and a new outfit to don upon my next outing. I can't, though, because I'd be fooling myself. With that attitude I would have never have bested the Covenant on legendary or defeated General Raam on insane.

This is not for Achievements or bragging rights, it's simply to prove that I can endure. That no matter what they throw my in way, I can adapt and succeed. So, mighty Kratos, dust yourself down and pick up your blades. Destiny awaits...
Mike Burgess
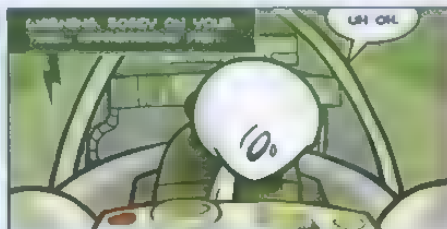
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